

The
Executioner
and Her Way of Life

◆◆◆ THE CAGE OF IRON SAND ◆◆◆

3

Mato
Sato

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nilitsu



The
Executioner
and Her Way of Life



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Prologue

Chapter 1: The Traitorous Vessel

Chapter 2: The Traitorous Eyes

Interlude

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NEW YORK

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The Executioner and Her Way of Life 3

Mato Sato

TRANSLATION BY JENNY MCKEON ❖ COVER ART BY NILITSU

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SHOKEI SHOUJO NO IKIRU MICHU (VIRGIN ROAD) Vol.3

-TESSHA NO ORI—

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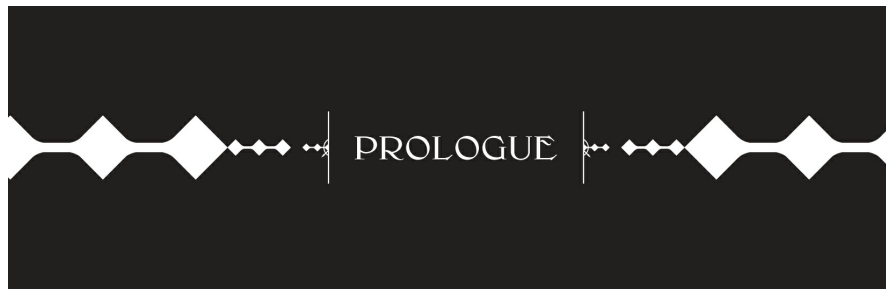
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The searing white sun passed through the sky, tracing the horizon.

Almost unnaturally bright, it never rose or set, carving a perfect path parallel to the skyline. Circling all three hundred sixty degrees, it had done this without a clear beginning or end, never once ceasing its perpetual cycle.

This was a world stopped in time, with no day or night.

As if the sky wasn't mysterious enough, the land itself was in an inexplicable state, too.

At a glance, the scene seemed ordinary enough.

There were towns and villages, buildings with people living in them. Many of them were rather timeworn and almost Victorian-looking structures, but these houses weren't strange enough that one would think too much of them. In the fields and forests were monsters that threatened the people's everyday lives, and there were also adventurers who made a living by destroying such beasts.

But this world, which seemed natural, was all artificially made.

The people who lived in the towns and villages were all conjured puppets, carefully crafted to look like humans. The lifelike monsters, too, were all soldiers without blood or flesh, not natural creatures with their own ecosystem. And it wasn't just the moving organisms that were fictions created with conjuring. Everything, from the land to the plants, was created and colored by a power from the Primary Colors.

The workings of this world were all made from Concepts of Primary Colors.

They were said to be capable of creating a world—because they *had* accomplished such a feat.

The result was the eastern Wild Frontier: the Mechanical Society.

It was made with an almost pathological level of precision, every inch packed

with detail. Created with the three Primary Colors, this disturbingly large diorama seemed to repaint the world itself.

Upon realizing this, one would shudder at the emptiness of it all.

The mindless puppets went about their lives without saying a word. Families living together in houses. Children playing in the park. None of it held an ounce of meaning. They never produced a single emotion, never raised the slightest peep, only ever making dull echoes of their movements.

It was a robotic, empty box, created on land that was bound by the endless presence of the unsetting sun running parallel to the horizon.

There were no living creatures here. Even if a living being did set foot in this world saturated by Primary Colors, they would instantly be cloaked by the hue and made into one of the conjured soldiers that populated this world.

All of it was artificial.

In the heart of this world—where all things were manipulated by a puppet master—an innocent singing voice disrupted the silence, strangely out of place.

“Mm, mm, mmm, mm, mm, mmm!”

It was a little girl with black hair and black eyes, wearing a white dress. She looked like she was less than ten years old. There was something innocent and cherubic about her, though her features were rather refined. Heedless of the bizarre nature of this world, she cheerfully hummed a tune.

“Mm, mm-mm, mmm, mmm, mm, mmm!”

The girl was riding on a limbless monster that resembled a giant earthworm. Though it had no arms or legs, its body was covered in very humanlike mouths, and it was dragging itself along the ground with its teeth. Like a centipede but with mouths in place of legs.

The innocent-looking girl riding atop the hideous monster was even more horrifying.

Something was viscerally upsetting about how cheerfully she was humming despite being in a mechanical world cleansed of any living things and riding on a frightening creature. The warmth of her flowing blood, the softness of the soles

of her bare feet, the intonation of her wordless tune...all of it was far too warm for this world in a way that chilled one to the core.

By all appearances, the girl was an innocent cherub—harmless, defenseless, and adorable. It would be difficult for an outsider to understand why such an adorable child seemed so out of place in this world.

Only the dress with three holes in the chest gave any indication of the girl's dark nature.

She was the worst of all the Otherworlders who held unnatural powers. The progenitor of all monsters and demons in this world: Pandæmonium.

Character name: Pandæmonium. Data has been registered.

“Mm?”

The little girl suddenly looked up at the sky. A voice seemed to ring inside her head.

Welcome to Container World. Your ability to level up is...

As the voice continued to speak in her head, the little girl tapped the monster she was riding with a finger. It was a signal for the monster to bite down on the girl's body, using its many mouths to tear her flesh and crush her bones, devouring the little girl within moments.

As a few of the mouths smacked their lips with satisfaction, a slender arm burst out between another set of teeth.

“How rude. You're getting on my nerves.”

From within the mouth emerged the same little girl who had just been chewed up and consumed. Covered in monster fluid, she dragged herself out headfirst, then her torso, and finally came the rest of her body.

“I have business in the area, so I figured I'd come check on a certain someone for the first time in a thousand years, but I guess we still don't see eye to eye.”

She had sacrificed her own body to summon a new self. The girl—who was immortal and whose death catalyzed revival—did a spinning jump back on top of the monster, returning to where she'd been before.

“Too bad. You’re a thousand years too early to try to mess with me and control me! I’m not going along with your silly games. As far as I’m concerned, movies are the best form of entertainment there is!”

With the unharmed girl riding atop it, the hundred-mouthed monster continued crawling along as if nothing had happened.

“Anyone who watches movies learns that the world isn’t supposed to be emotionless. Tragedies and comedies trigger a response in us because we have human hearts. Desperately struggling for freedom or defying fate gives our lives value... But the problem with gamers is that you just try to create elaborate things instead.”

Shaking her head in a show of utter exasperation, she gazed up at the distant sun.

In this world painted entirely with Primary Colors, the only pure-white object present was the sun in the sky.

Who would ever suspect that the white sun was man-made?

That was the one element that wasn’t part of this world’s creation—an artificial sun, made by the *Ivory* hero to seal away the endlessly multiplying *Vessel* a thousand years ago.

“It really is so grand, wonderful, and white.”

The ultimate, unbeatable, most powerful Pure Concept: *Ivory*. A single glance at that relic it had left behind was a reminder of its awe-inspiring strength.

If *Ivory* hadn’t been there a thousand years ago, what would have become of the world?

For better or worse, things certainly would’ve gone very differently.

There were only two beings that even *Ivory* couldn’t kill completely: the weakest yet most despicable *Evil* and the smallest yet most numerous *Vessel*. The former brought forth demons and monsters with Original Sin, but the latter used the Primary Colors to paint over the world.

The Pure Concept *Vessel* could create any shape and conceal itself within any form. With the limitless expansion of Primary Colors, it had tried to take control

over the entire world. Which was why *Ivory* had created an eternal white midnight sun, to seal the threat away in a fictional world. It was an attempt to destroy the boundary between day and night, to cut off all sense of geography, time, space, and any other conceptual connection from the outside world.

Just like the seal that kept Pandæmonium in the fog, this seal, too, held for a thousand years without fail.

But somewhere along the line...

The white night that was supposed to be never-ending began to be visited by sunset.

For just an hour a day, the white sun sank away, and a true night fell.

In the darkness, Pandæmonium made her way into the heart of the world.

It was then that the conjured puppets that imitated humans, the Mechanical Society that mimicked life in another world, suddenly stopped.

Tens of millions of gazes gathered on her. The hundred-mouthed creature Pandæmonium was riding thinned all its lips, as if unable to bear the pressure.

"Mm." The adorable little girl puffed up her cheeks in a pout. "So you're still alive after all. I'm sad that you ignored me for so long."

"Damned bugs," a voice echoed.

One of the conjured puppets had opened its mouth, leading the others to follow in a cascade of voices.

"Pesky bugs." "Damned maggot. You always come back even when I crush you." "I try to fix you, but you never go away." "Why are you here?" "In our peaceful realm?" "Why does anyone else dare try to exist here?" "Why do you attempt to open our world?"

"I see you haven't changed a bit. You're the definition of a shut-in, aren't you? I can't imagine anyone else would complain about the seal starting to weaken."

It had been so long that Pandæmonium had even forgotten how to speak for a time. And yet, this person was complaining about the thousand-year stopper loosening at last.

“Why should I care?” “What does that matter?” “The bugs haven’t been crushed yet.” “There’s not enough time.” “For eternity.” “There is never enough time.” “Especially if it’s possible to go outside.” “Then I need even more time.” “To make the outside all part of my world, too.”

Pandæmonium shrugged her small shoulders at the echoing, forlorn voices.

“We still don’t get along, do we? Mm, your Pure Concept and mine are like oil and water anyway. We’re bound not to mix, but...being in conflict is wonderfully chaotic, too, I guess.” Pandæmonium cast her eyes around.

This entire world had been made by just one person. Amid all the strangely Victorian-style buildings, there was one structure that looked out of place: a square, three-story building made of reinforced concrete. The building had an attached gymnasium and fenced-off grounds. Its architecture was unfamiliar in this world, but any Japanese person would recognize it at once.

It was a school building.

“You’re in there, aren’t you? You never change, even if you pretend you do. I think that’s really quite typical of you.”

Looking at the heart of the Mechanical Society, which continued producing its strange world, Pandæmonium shook her head.

“But if you’re in there, then I’m not coming in. I’m sure it’ll be much more fun to leave here, meet up with Manon, and play with her.”

There was only one reason she wasn’t going in to see her old acquaintance for the first time in a thousand years.

“I always hated school. At least, I think I did.”

Letting the remnants of her memories and personality drift away on the wind, Pandæmonium twirled around to walk away. Then she blinked in surprise. Suddenly, someone was right in front of her.

A faceless man stood in front of Pandæmonium. Holes riddled his body, especially his head, where it looked like his facial features had been hollowed out.

And yet, he was alive. The Guiding Force that overflowed from his wounds

was serving as his body.

“Mm!”

Pandæmonium, it seemed, had never seen the likes of him before. She exclaimed in surprise and spread her arms wide.

“Nice to meet you. Sooo, who might you be?”



The Traitorous Vessel

The world was frozen over.

The cold, dry air blew over the pale moon, which was the only light source in the silent desert. The chilly beams of light were faded in places, shining down on the ruins that sank into the sand as if to seal them there for eternity.

This was the middle of the Wild Frontier in the central part of the continent. It was especially remote even for the enormous desert, where no one was ever likely to tread.

The quiet moonlight illuminated the ruins of what was once a residence. Humans had abandoned this structure in the face of the harsh climate, but now shadows flitted through in silence like spirits of the dead.

There were three of them. One was shouldering a sack large enough to contain another person. A muffled groan escaped from the closed top of the sack. Judging by the way it was squirming around in protest, there had to be a person inside.

The three men were unmoved by the resistance, which seemed more irritating than anything, as they ran along their hidden route through the desert. Even in the dark of night, with only the moonlight to guide them, they moved with trained precision, never hesitating or sinking into the sand.

As further proof that they were highly experienced, they were all cloaked in faint light that drove away the pitch-black night—a power called Guiding Force that could be drawn from the soul, the root of life, to boost their physical strength.

The Guiding Enhancement made their strides fast and strong. Eventually, a metal gate appeared in their path.

The gatekeeper approached and had a brief exchange with the men. In the guard's hand was a weapon that the Faust forbade to be produced, distributed,

or possessed: a Guiding gun.

Once he peered at each of their faces, the gatekeeper nodded and signaled toward the entrance. The doors opened with a heavy metal grating, and the men stepped into the facility.

The gatekeeper returned to his post. It was a taxing job, but his face was alert as he looked around.

He, however, didn't realize that an intruder had slipped through when the gate opened moments ago.

The men were being followed.

It was no surprise that none of them had noticed. The mysterious individual was more like a wisp of air cloaked in darkness than an ordinary human. In the already low visibility, someone who was disguised in the color of the night would be all too easy to miss.

Once inside, the intruder let down the technique she'd been using.

"...Whew."

The darkness seemed to melt away, revealing a lovely young woman who looked to be in her mid-teens.

She wore an indigo priestess robe, a yellow cape, and a skirt and held a scripture in one hand—all clear indications that she was a member of the Faust. The right side of her skirt had a slit that exposed her leg, but it was by no means a fashion choice: it was a modification so she could access the dagger belted to her right thigh.

"Let's see..."

Having followed the men and infiltrated the facility, Menou licked her lips. As she looked around, her light-chestnut hair swished behind her, secured in a ponytail by a black scarf ribbon.

Guiding Camouflage—a technique that involved changing the color of the phosphorescent light produced by Guiding Enhancement to fool the eye—required very precise control of Guiding Force. It was an incredibly difficult technique that only a few people could use, but recently, Menou had mastered

active Camouflage, the art of matching her color to her surroundings.

Using this to transform into someone else was an even more difficult feat. With her current abilities, Menou could cover her face with a mask, but changing her natural features was harder. Even keeping up Guiding Camouflage while following the men in the dark of night was not easy at all.

“They’re skilled, all right. I’ll have to be careful.”

As she recalled the movements of the men she’d followed, Menou checked her surroundings again, her expression still serious.

This place must have been built on preexisting ruins; there were simple clay buildings everywhere. She spotted some tents and huts being used as barracks and a five-story building in the middle. Judging by the tight security, that was probably the center of the operation.

It was all surprisingly thorough for something in the middle of the Wild Frontier.

Menou scowled, annoyed to have to infiltrate such a place without any prior research. And it was all because of the contents of the sack those men were carrying.

Yes, the person inside the sack was Menou’s traveling companion: Akari.

She was a naive, carefree, happy-go-lucky girl. But she was also a lost one, a person summoned from another world with a strange and formidable power attached to her soul called a Pure Concept. There was no shortage of people who would want to get their hands on her power, which could even undo the will of the world.

The men had attacked as they were crossing the desert to escape the Wild Frontier. There were a total of five in the party who jumped them in the middle of the night. At first, she’d assumed they were just some delinquents who thought they’d stumbled across two defenseless women, but they turned out to be far more skilled than expected. While Menou was cutting down two of them, the other three captured Akari and fled from under her nose.

It was Menou’s fault, even if it had been a surprise attack. She was motivated by the urge to destroy their base; it was the reason she’d continued following

the men after she tracked them down.

But now that she saw the scale of that base, she was regretting her choice.

“I should’ve gotten in touch with Momo right away...”

Momo was her junior and her aide. Picturing the girl with the two pink pigtails, Menou sighed.

She’d assumed that some desert bandits couldn’t be more than a few dozen people, but their headquarters was practically a military base. Judging by the amount of materials and number of personnel in sight, there had to be over a hundred people here, and they must have been part of a bigger organization.

There were few towns with bases of this scale, even in populated territories. Bringing it down was a task far too large for one person, including an Executioner like Menou.

“...I guess I’ll focus on getting Akari back.”

Who had made a base in the middle of the Wild Frontier, and why? It was Menou’s duty to pass judgment on those engaged in forbidden activities, so she wanted to know what was happening here, but she couldn’t investigate until she accomplished her main goal of recovering Akari.

Steadying herself, Menou set her sights on one of the buildings: the one the men had just entered with the sack that contained Akari.

It was an unrefined single-story building, evidently made with stone from the ruins. Menou drew close to the window and scratched the glass. With scarcely a sound, she broke the pane near the lock and opened the window before slipping into the room.

There was no sign of anyone inside. A Guiding lamp, a vessel for Guiding Force, illuminated the space.

Menou slid down the hallway, her footsteps silent. Conveniently, she soon caught up to the men who were hauling the bag.

The men who’d been sprinting in silence outside were now chatting as they ambled down the hallway, their guards down now that they were inside their base. None of them seemed to notice Menou. As she continued trailing them

carefully, they reached a room lined with iron bars.

It appeared to be some kind of prison. This building must have been for holding captives, then. Menou grimaced, imagining what it might look like if the place were full.

The men opened one of the empty cells and moved to toss the sack containing Akari inside.

It was Menou's turn to strike. Her targets were the three men who had captured Akari. And having followed them into the room, Menou was between them and the exit.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

She stealthily invoked a crest that created thread around her dagger's hilt.

Still behind them, Menou matched her breathing to the men's, calculating the perfect timing. How many of them could she take down with a surprise attack? Her focus tightened like a bowstring being drawn.

Her main target was the man holding Akari. The last thing she needed was for him to use her as a shield. Concentrating her focus to the tips of her fingers, she pictured a perfect hit on her target.

Then she threw the dagger.

"Ngah—"

The dagger drove into the back of the man's head and through his brain stem, killing him instantly. He crumpled to the floor with the blade still attached, letting Akari's sack crash down.

The other two reacted immediately.

"Tch!"

"Dammit! We were followed!"

Despite the fact that their comrade had just died in front of them, the men assessed the situation calmly and shifted into battle mode. Their movements were smooth as they pulled out knives and small Guiding guns and pointed them at Menou.

They were skilled, Menou had to admit. As she inwardly clicked her tongue, the two fired at once. When they pulled the triggers, the unusual barrels drew out their Guiding Force, which was condensed into bullets that shot toward her with a *bang*.

Their aim was smart. Rather than trying to hit her, they fired warning shots to try to move Menou away from the exit. Most likely, they hoped to catch her flank when she moved out of their line of fire and take control of the fight.

Since she could tell that was their plan, however, Menou was under no obligation to go along with it.

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robes, Crest—Invoke [Barrier]

The barrier crest etched into her priestess robes activated. A wall of faint light formed in front of Menou, bouncing the projectiles back.

“Mmph?!”

Akari squirmed around on the floor like a caterpillar, either out of pain from hitting the floor or alarm from the sound of gunshots. At a glance, it didn’t look like she’d been hit by any stray bullets. If Akari tried to do anything, she could cause all kinds of trouble.

Menou snapped at her. “Akari. Stay still!”

“Mmph. Mmmph!”

Though her words were incomprehensible, Akari at least stopped moving. Deciding that she’d be okay on her own for the moment, Menou concentrated on the two men.

In a pause between the gunshots, the barrier disappeared, and Menou dashed forward. She yanked on the Guiding Thread attached to her dagger to pull it back into her hands. As she readied the blade, she closed in without hesitation, keeping the distance short enough that they wouldn’t have time to aim.

Menou lashed out at one man’s throat, and he just barely managed to block with his knife.

Their eyes met. While Menou’s expression was perfectly cool, the man was

clearly panicking. The girl's slender arm was pushing back his thick, muscular one. She was using Guiding Enhancement to make up for the natural difference in their strength and even surpassing him in power.

"Damn...you...!"

The other man snarled and moved to aim his gun at Menou, who shifted immediately to place his comrade between them as a shield. She was positioning herself to stay in a one-on-one battle instead of one-on-two.

They had a visible difference in skill. It would only be a matter of time before the fight would end.

The men quickly made a judgment call.

"Listen! She's too strong for us. Bring out you-know-what."

"Got it!"

Menou didn't know what they were referring to, but given the timing, it was probably some kind of reinforcements. Were they going to sacrifice one man so the other could go get help? She prepared to stop them, but her assumption was wrong.

Instead, there was a flash of red light from within the man in back. Menou's eyes widened at the all-too-familiar sign.

He had a Primary Red Stone embedded in his body.

"Are you insane?!" Menou cried.

The man laughed fiercely in reply.

The next instant, he contracted inward with a squelching sound. The red stone inside him absorbed his body from the inside. Unlike the terrorists Menou had once encountered on a train, this man didn't seem afraid at all.

It wasn't self-destruction. He was giving up his life to transfigure himself into an even more troublesome foe. He'd chosen a sacrificial strategy just to stop Menou.

"You—!"

"Not a chance!"

Menou tried to destroy the core before it could activate, but the remaining man stopped her. This, too, was a terrifying act of commitment to the cause. The man grimly used his knife and gun to buy enough time.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Red Stone, Inner Seal Conjunction—Activate [Primary Red, Six-Armed Soldier]

A red soldier manifested from the primary hues that colored the world.

Shaped like a deity with six arms, the conjured fighter impaled the man who was struggling against Menou with a swing of its swords. Then it brought a red blade toward her from her blind spot.

“What?!”

Menou knocked away the weapon, and she immediately jumped up high into the air. The man who’d been stabbed from behind by the conjured soldier smirked.

“Heh-heh...! Too late. You’re not getting out of here alive.”

Even with his dying breath, the man never once cursed his fate.

His body shriveled. The sword that had impaled him was absorbing his blood as sustenance. And it wasn’t just that man. Each of the conjured soldier’s six swords was moving toward the man Menou had first brought down—and toward Akari, who was still in the sack.

“I won’t let you!” Menou shouted angrily.

If she hesitated at all, she’d never make it. Heedless of the danger, she sprang directly toward the girl as quickly as she could.

The red sword sliced through the air, just barely missing her.

All six swords swung toward Menou at differing speeds, trying to surround her. As she dived in a straight line, the conjured soldier predicted her movements all too easily. If anyone else was there to witness this scene, they would surely expect to see Menou’s innards splattered everywhere in the next moment.

But the attacks, coming toward her with triple the limbs of an ordinary human, didn’t even graze her.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Gale]

Just as the swords moved, there was a burst of wind from Menou's dagger.

It was a speedy, expertly used crest conjuring. The sudden gust propelled the priestess even faster, allowing her to slip past the arms.

"Mmph?!"

Sliding past the conjured soldier, Menou grabbed the sack without slowing down. The sudden movement must have surprised Akari, who exclaimed from inside, but Menou ignored her. As she shouldered the sack and its pleasantly soft contents, she jumped back to put distance between her and the conjured soldier.

The enemy didn't try to chase her down. Instead, it impaled the man Menou had first brought down to absorb the corpse's blood.

Menou clicked her tongue.

"A Six-Armed Soldier..."

This was one form of autonomous conjured weapons: a knightlike construction modeled after a human.

Conjured soldiers were incredibly tough. Their entire bodies were hard, and they could keep moving as long as their core was intact. This was a poor match for Menou, who specialized in sharper, more targeted movements. To make matters worse, the person it was based on had been very strong. If she had to cross blades with those six swords, she might get pushed back.

Menou wasn't likely to lose to it in a one-on-one battle, but this was an enemy base. If she got surrounded by reinforcements while she was fighting this conjured soldier, they would be in big trouble. And if she made any big moves, that was likely to bring more enemies running.

It wasn't that she couldn't handle the conjured soldier in front of her; it was the overall situation that had her worried.

What should she do?

Menou was gritting her teeth at her limited options when she heard a loud *clang*.

One of the iron-bar doors in the back of the room was rattling.

Menou hadn't realized there were any captives here besides Akari. She snapped her head around to look at the cell and saw a girl in a nun's outfit.

"Nice to see you again, Menou."

Nice to see you again. Menou's eyes widened at this greeting—an extremely unexpected one—and the person who said it.

The girl was around Menou's age, with eye-catching silver hair in loose waves. Her droopy emerald-green eyes made her look drowsy, but that wasn't necessarily the case. It was just her natural eye shape.

Menou knew this girl's name.

"No way... Is that you, Sahara?"

"It is." Sahara nodded and reached her left hand through the bars. "I see you're still wearing that ribbon."

Had she been captured and locked up, or did she end up here some other way? Menou had no idea, but there was no time to wonder.

"Could you let me out of here? I'm sure I can be of some help."

"All right." Menou needed any help she could get. She broke the lock with her dagger and opened the door. "Sahara. I know it's been a while, but catching up will have to wait until—"

"Listen, Menou."

GRRRGL. A stomach growled.

The possessor of said stomach, Sahara, spoke in a listless drawl. "Sorry. I'm so hungry, I don't have any strength left."

"So are you saying you're going to slow me down?!"

The enemy, of course, wouldn't stop and wait for them to finish this silly exchange.

Menou quickly pulled Sahara down to the floor to save them both from the soldier's attack.

“They’ve been giving me the bare minimum amount of food so I can’t break out... I figured if I didn’t say I could help, you’d abandon me. Sorry about that.”

“Of course I’d save you! You’re an old friend!”

In fact, even if she hadn’t been a familiar face, Menou still would have rescued any innocent person being held captive by this criminal group. How heartless did Sahara think she was?

She’d tried to increase her allies and ended up with even more baggage instead. At this point...Menou let Akari out of the sack.

“Oh, hey, cutie,” cooed Sahara in a voice that was far too relaxed for their current predicament. The person who emerged from the sack was a very cute girl.

She had black hair and round, lively black eyes. Though her face looked young for sixteen, she was far curvier than the average girl.

“Ahhh! Mmm! The air is so fresh out here. Thanks, Menou! Hmm? Who’s this lovely silver-haired lady—whoa, what’s with the red guy?!”

As soon as Menou untied the gag, Akari took a deep breath, immediately celebrated her freedom, tilted her head at the newcomer, and finally exclaimed in shock at the conjured soldier pointing its swords toward them—in that order. As always, she was very expressive.

“Hey, I’ve seen that kinda thing before! Y’know, from back when we first met. Am I right? The thing on the train, remember?!”

“That’s right. This is a similar situation. So I beg of you, Akari: Just be quiet!”

As Menou tried to silence the noisy abductee, Sahara casually interrupted. “Nice to meet you, Akari. You have very pretty black hair and eyes. I’m Sahara. I’m a nun, but you could also call me Menou’s old flame.”

“Huh?Who are you?”

“Save that for later.” Menou had no time to deal with this at the moment. After scolding them briefly, she draped her arms around Akari, whose eyes had gone dark for some reason, from behind.

“Wait a minute, Menou! I want to hear all about you and...um, Sahara? Right

this sec—”

“Akari. This is an emergency. I’m borrowing your Guiding Force.”

Guiding Force: Connect—Akari Tokitou—

“...Aahn!”

As Menou whispered in Akari’s ear, her Guiding Force entered the Japanese girl. Akari’s shoulders trembled from the sudden sensation.

Normally, trying to connect one’s Guiding Force with another person and manipulate their power would be met with painful resistance, but Menou and Akari were an exception. The pain was dependent on the level of trust the giver had toward the person trying to connect to them. When these two synced, the opposition was reduced to little more than a tickling sensation; thus, Menou was able to pull off the feat of using Akari’s Guiding Force.

Extract [Power]—via Menou—

“Hnng...hmph. I-if you think you can...distract me with th...mmm!”

As she tried to resist the ticklish feeling, Akari squirmed, her eyes damp and her breathing heavy and suggestive. She never quite formed the words as to what she was protesting.

Menou sent the power she’d extracted from Akari into her scripture and focused on constructing a conjuring. Sahara whistled, presumably in admiration of her mastery of this skill.

“Connecting Guiding Force...? Leave it to you, Menou. When it comes to seducing women until they can’t tell up from down, you’re second to none.”

That was not the direction of praise Menou was expecting.

A vein pulsed on Menou’s temple. She had hoped Sahara would stay quiet so that she could concentrate. It was tempting to shout at her, but Menou didn’t have any time to waste. Instead, she grimaced through it and kept her focus on the conjuring. It was time to bring it to fruition.

Scripture, 3:1—Invoke [And the oncoming enemy did hear the tolling of the bell.]

An enormous bell made of power formed from the scripture in Menou's hand.

It was a church symbol that traditionally told the time. Thanks to Akari's enormous amount of Guiding Force, the conjuring in the form of a bell tower was big enough to cover the entire building.

And it was just as powerful as it was large.

The magnificent bell made of power began to swing back and forth.

Its air-shaking peals blasted the red conjured soldier to shreds. And it didn't stop there; it sent out shock waves of power that bore down on the area all around them. The makeshift building was only able to hold up to the sudden pressure from the inside for a matter of seconds.

One, two—by the third ring, the entire building had exploded outward.

“Wah!”

Looking around nervously, Akari exclaimed at the new sight.

They'd been inside just moments ago, but now they could see the night sky. Rubble of all sizes was scattered around them. With Akari and Menou at the center, an entire building had blown away. Even Sahara widened her eyes at the unthinkable power of this attack.

“That was...crazy.”

“Menou, that was amazing! You're the purest, most proper, most powerful priestess ever! But, uh...is *this* gonna be okay?”

“It's fine, of course. This was clearly some evil facility built by people up to no good. The world's better off without it.”

Executioners believed that people who got involved with anything taboo forfeited their human rights.

It was silent around them. People came running out of nearby buildings, but it didn't look like they were on a mission to stop an intruder. From the looks of things, they were in a panic, trying to find out why a building had suddenly blown up from the inside.

We have to get out of here right now, Menou thought. Then, suddenly, Sahara

was behind her, wrapping her arms around her.

“You have to do something about the *Vessel*...”

Menou began to question her, but the girl brought her lips closer to Menou’s ear.

“You have to kill me.”

It was an unexpected request.

By the time Menou turned to ask what she meant, Sahara had already pulled away.

Confused as she was, Menou decided she would have to ask about it later. For now, she picked up Akari bridal style, activated Guiding Enhancement, and added Camouflage to vanish into the night.

“All right, we’re making a break for it. Hang on tight.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” Akari replied cheerfully, already latching on to Menou’s neck.

“Wait, Menou. What about me? You’re not gonna carry me?”

Menou shot Sahara a chilly glare.

“I don’t care how hungry you are—run like your life depends on it.”

“This is discrimination... C’mon, you’re supposed to treat us like we’re equals...”

Menou and company made a hasty escape in the chaos caused by the building they’d blown away.



"How can I be like you?"

It was right before she entered the monastery. Putting on a nun's outfit for the first time, young Menou asked this question of her just once.

Perhaps it was just an impulsive question from a child who knew nothing.

The woman Menou was asking was a survivor, an Executioner who had hunted down more taboo entities than any other. How much experience did she have under her belt, how many hellscapes had she fought through, what had she done to become like this? The answer was likely not meant for a child with very little natural talent, not to mention any memories of her past.

Even so, Menou asked.

As they stood on the pure-white expanse of sand, she resolved to become an Executioner. Witnessing this destruction—so much like what had happened to her own hometown but on a far bigger scale—she decided to be on the side that fought against these taboo entities. And her young heart looked to the woman who was always walking in front of her for guidance.

"I'll become a pure, proper, and powerful villain."

And when Menou said that, the woman responded: *"Then I'll drill everything I am into your head."*

So when the initial preparations were complete, and she put on her uniform for the first time, she asked: *"How can I be like you?"*

"What an idiot."

The priestess with dark-red hair threw back her head and laughed with her mouth wide open at the innocent question.

She placed her hand heavily on young Menou's head. She carried a scripture with her left arm, and her right hand was always empty so that she could pull out a weapon at a moment's notice. So when she put her hand on Menou's head, it was always with the hand that wielded a blade.

"Menou, if you're going to learn everything I am, you'll need to know one thing first. If you want to be like me, then you've got a long road ahead of you."

Menou's Master, Flare, twisted her lips sardonically.

"You know far too little. First, you must learn people's hearts and minds, so you can crush them underfoot. Next, you must learn the ways of the world, so you can outwit society. Finally, learn the truth of the universe, so you can resign yourself."

The most accomplished hunter in history. Just what had she seen when facing off and surviving against the inconceivable beings that continued to be born into this world?

"Know this: What's right is wrong, justice is the true evil, victory and defeat are the same, and the beginning is also the end. You imagine the world to be fixable, but it's a lot more hopeless than you realize."

The Master pulled her hand away from Menou's head. She had neither patted Menou's head lightly nor tidied her chestnut hair.

"And once you've grown up a little and gotten a chance at happiness, you'll probably realize you don't want to be like me at all. That's when you'll finally take your first step closer to being me."

With that, she set off.

"And that's why I'm going to fill your head with everything I am."

Menou watched as she walked away.

What exactly was her Master trying to say? Her head still tilted to the side, young Menou thought about it, but she couldn't come up with an answer in the end.

Instead, she trotted after her Master, moving forward with that dark-red hair to guide her...just as she had always done.

And as she looked up at her Master's back and chased after her, she knew that would likely always be the case.

She didn't know what she wanted to protect.

She only had the childish feeling that she wanted to protect people.

Thus, Menou began to walk the path that was stained red.

“...The hell happened here?”

Two men stood in front of the building that had been destroyed beyond all hope of repair.

One was near his forties with a well-toned physique. His default expression was one more of ferocity than calm.

This man’s name was Wolff, and he was the leader in charge of the armed group Iron Chain that had its base here in the desert.

“The damned cells keeping our goods are all messed up. How the hell does the base of Iron Chain, the most notorious band in the desert, get into such a sorry state? I heard the team who went out on the attack came back, so I came to check out the products, and what the hell do I find? Tell me, Miller. What’s going on here?”

“I don’t think it’s that hard to figure out.”

The man called Miller appeared to be a young man in his mid-twenties. He was slender compared to Wolff, but he still looked formidable. His cold eyes were reminiscent of a reptile’s.

He was crouched down, inspecting the remains of the broken building. While everything was a mess from the explosion, he’d spotted some clearly unusual prints: three different sets that were unmistakably small.

All of their underlings at this base were men, and none of particularly small frame. That meant the people who left the footprints had to be outsiders. He narrowed his eyes and picked something up from the ground.

It was a long strand of chestnut hair.

Wolff could guess the whole story with one glance at the thing in Miller’s hand.

“Oh, I see. Chestnut hair, huh? Means it wasn’t the silver-haired nun who blew this building to bits, and the Otherworlder didn’t get outta here on her own, either. Otherworlders always have black hair, yeah?”

“Exactly. It’s gotta be a priestess.”

“So they let some wannabe bodyguard priestess invade our base, blow up a building, and get away... Well, I’m a generous guy. I’ll forgive the dead outta the goodness of my heart. This building didn’t factor into our plans anyway.”

“So what now?”

“Let’s see.” Wolff crossed his arms. “We’ll put kidnapping on hold for now. You get it, right? What we need ain’t people, it’s materials. The whole reason we chose this place without an astral vein is so the Faust wouldn’t notice what we’re up to.”

“I know. But people *are* materials. And we’re done remodeling this base. That Otherworlder’s Guiding Force might be all we need. Our goal is to set *him* free. If this place can connect to the eastern Wild Frontier—to the Mechanical Society, even on a small scale—we’ll accomplish our goal soon enough.”

The men nodded at each other.

“Guess we can spare a few more lives for that, then. Might as well roll the dice.”

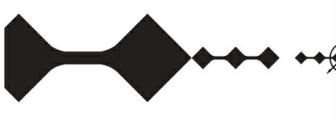
Wolff looked into the distance in a specific direction. This desert was large, but there was one place any traveler was bound to pass through.

“Take some men and get ahead of them to the supply stop at the oasis. Look for a chestnut-haired priestess with a black-haired girl and a nun with a prosthetic hand. Three young women traveling alone are bound to stand out there. Best option would be to take them all alive, but—well, if you can’t, dead’s fine, too. I’d hate to lose the Guiding Force, but at least they’ll make good materials.”

“Got it. I’m always up for a fight.” Miller nodded at the leader’s order and blew away the strand of hair in his fingers. “I wanna level up, too, y’know?”

“Ha-ha-ha! Damn right. If we kill Flarette and free one of the Four Major Human Errors, we’re bound to move up in the world!”

His eyes glittering with danger, Wolff barked out a laugh.



The Traitorous Eyes



Menou awoke to the first rays of the morning sun.

Wild animals were just beginning to stir in the light of dawn. As the creatures began to move now that the twilight had broken and day had begun, their calls and cries disrupted Menou's slumber.

"Ah...it's morning."

Menou was quick to transition from drowsiness to full awareness.

The night when Akari had been kidnapped—a night when Menou had gotten into a considerable scrape to rescue her—was over. Once they got away from the base, Menou had slept lightly enough that she could wake up and react accordingly if anything were to happen.

Crouching on one knee and closing her eyes, Menou probed her surroundings, confirming that nothing strange had happened since she last checked before she slumbered.

Akari, the victim of the night before, was sleeping soundly beside her.

She was around Menou's age, but her facial features made her seem a little younger, and she appeared especially childlike when she was fast asleep. Though they were around the same height, Akari was inexplicably far more developed in certain key areas. Her unruly black hair was usually tamed by a floral-patterned headband, but she had taken it off to sleep. It was honestly impressive that she was sleeping so deeply after the ordeal she had gone through the night before.

Akari Tokitou.

She was a lost one from another world with an unbelievable power called a Pure Concept resting within her.

"Ahhhh..." Akari groaned when Menou poked her cheek, but it didn't take

long before she rolled over and continued to sleep. Determining that she wouldn't be waking up for a while, Menou turned her attention to their other companion.

Sitting near the entrance to the tent was a girl in a nun's outfit, someone whom Menou had rescued the previous night.

She had wavy silver hair and a serene aura about her. Her nun's habit was primarily black, as was traditional. What Menou hadn't noticed the night before was that her right arm wasn't flesh and blood. It was a highly unusual prosthetic, almost like a silver gauntlet.

A Guiding prosthetic.

It was no ordinary artificial limb. Guiding Force drew power from the soul, controlled it with the spirit, and used it to fill the flesh. This was a reverse-engineered use of that nature: The prosthetic limb connected from the body to the soul and used the soul's power to move it as naturally as a real limb. It was a highly advanced Guiding vessel.

It was attached to Sahara, who was now snoozing away as she sat at the tent's entrance.

Incidentally, it was supposed to be her turn to keep watch at the moment.

"....." Menou silently grabbed the nearest object and chucked it at the back of Sahara's skull, landing a perfect bull's-eye in the middle of her silver-haired head, which bobbed sleepily. Sahara opened her eyes and blinked around in confusion.

As the girl shook her head to wake up, she spotted the projectile. Then she frowned and looked at the culprit who appeared to have thrown it.

"Mmm...and what exactly was that for, Menou?"

Sahara yawned as she complained, and Menou responded with a menacing smile.

"You really don't know why I woke you up?"

Realizing that she'd nodded off through most of her watch shift, Sahara averted her eyes, looking far into the distance.

“Eh, it’s no big deal. Dozing off during watch is nothing compared to the importance of getting a good night’s sleep, if you ask me. Besides, nothing bad happened. That means I didn’t cause any harm by falling asleep, right?”

There wasn’t a shred of remorse in Sahara’s excuses. Menou scowled, though she also thanked her lucky stars that no one had come after them right away.

Maybe that group was too busy dealing with the parting gift they’d left—an exploded building. Or were they planning to get ahead of Menou and company instead? Either way, at least they hadn’t attacked them in the night.

“Well, let’s put that aside...for now.”

Menou stood up and checked on Akari. Just as she’d suspected, the girl showed no signs of waking even while Sahara and Menou were conversing next to her. She was generally a heavy sleeper.

“Let’s step outside for a moment, shall we? I’d like to hear a full explanation from you...”

“No problem. I’ll tell you everything, as long as you make me a pork cutlet bowl after.”

“If you can explain how you ended up with such a bizarre personality.”

Raising the flap at the front of the tent, the two of them walked outside.

There were wavelike shapes on the ground.

The fine sand was blown back and forth, dancing in the wind. If the surface of the sand was the ocean, the swelling dunes were large waves that were standing still. Looking at the rippling patterns on the far-off sands, it was easy to imagine one was standing on a liquid surface.

Before their eyes was the enormous desert that Menou and company had to traverse: the Wild Frontier in the center of the continent, the Balar Desert.

It was an enormous arid region that humanity had given up on trying to settle. Since what little rain fell there evaporated faster than it could accumulate, it was virtually uninhabitable even by plants. The environment alone had made it impossible for people to live there.

Golden sand stretched out in every direction, dotted with ancient ruins. It was

likely the desert of purest sand anywhere on the continent.

Menou and Sahara stayed a short distance away from the tent, far enough that Akari wouldn't overhear them even if she miraculously woke up.

"At any rate, it's good to see you again, Sahara."

"Yeah. You too, Menou."

Neither smiled as they exchanged formalities.

Sahara, the nun. Menou still remembered her beautiful silver hair, her sleepy-looking eyes, and her aloof tone.

Sahara was raised in the same monastery as Menou and Momo. She had gotten there a little earlier than them, but she seemed to be the same age as Menou. In a way, she had been a classmate at that bizarre place.

Sahara was also one of the girls who had left the monastery when Menou was released.

"I hear rumors about you once in a while, Menou. Seems like you've become a skilled Executioner, who solves problems for the places she visits on her duties and seduces girls in the process. Congrats."

She smiled placidly even as she sounded like she was trying to get a rise out of Menou.

Menou hadn't heard anything about her since they left the monastery, but evidently, she'd become a rather...*pleasant* person. She'd been a bit more normal when they were younger.

Sahara placed her left hand on her chest and continued with grace.

"As a pretty young lady myself, I'm a little worried, but...I don't mind if it's you, Menou. We've known each other since we were little, after all. I'm ready for you."

"Argh!"

Where did Sahara hear these ridiculous rumors, or did she just make them up herself? The only proper response to this pointless declaration was a punishment in the form of a leg sweep that sent Sahara tumbling face-first into

the sand.

“Now, about that base yesterday. Would you mind sharing the details?”

“How curious. Why did I trip into the sand just now...?”

Sahara furrowed her brow in puzzlement like she really didn’t know why as she got to her feet, dusting herself off.

“I already told you last night about the guys.”

What were the goals of that group with the base from the night before? Why had they come after Akari? Based on the information Sahara gave from her own experience being captured by them, Menou was already forming a theory.

As she suspected, it was no accident that the men had targeted Akari.

After all, Menou was a priestess. She wore indigo priestess robes that made this clear at a glance. Though she had modified hers by adding a large slit, it was still obvious to anyone that Menou was a member of the Faust, the highest estate of the realm in the societal system.

And no one in this world would question the superiority of a priestess chosen by the Faust.

Yet, the men yesterday had plotted to kidnap Akari, knowing the risk of attacking a priestess. In other words, it was safe to assume they knew Akari’s worth—knew that she was an Otherworlder with a Pure Concept.

Sahara’s information only supported this theory.

“Their organization is called Iron Chain. They call themselves adventurers, but they’re actually armed delinquents who specialize in kidnapping. They target and abduct individuals from various cities and sell them out here—they’re the scum of the desert.”

Human trafficking was strictly forbidden in all nations.

However, it hadn’t been wiped out completely. In the shadows, people were still being bought and sold like objects. And since the Wild Frontier didn’t belong to any nation, it was the ideal place to carry out illegal transactions.

“Believe it or not, they claim that they only deal in ‘high-quality human

resources.”

“High quality, huh...?”

If that was their self-proclaimed intent, then they likely weren’t selling people to brothels or into forced labor. After all, this world had Original Sin Conjurings, which were invoked by sacrificing humans.

Buying up people was a necessity for researchers conducting taboo conjurings, which consumed a great deal of human bodies. Those with unusual qualities that might serve well for conjurings were sold at high prices.

“I see. So that’s why they’re after Akari.”

“Uh-huh. The information must have leaked to them somehow. These guys have their eye on you two. The boss of Iron Chain is a nasty criminal who’s wanted all over the continent.”

Otherworlders from Japan were considered the highest-quality materials for conjuring. Unfortunately, there was no shortage of people who would buy them for enormous sums.

Menou’s trip with Akari, an Otherworlder, had already gotten them caught up in some elaborate schemes.

In the ancient capital of Garm, Archbishop Orwell—a woman who had been nearly at the highest position in the Faust—turned out to be an enemy, targeting Akari for her Otherworlder’s Pure Concept, and even Menou, who had her own unique qualities, to conduct a taboo conjuring. A formidable foe, she’d nearly captured them both.

When they’d arrived in the port city of Libelle, they got caught up in an incident centered around monstine, brought about by Manon Libelle of the Noblesse, and ended up having to fight the legendary Human Error Pandæmonium. As one of the Four Major Human Errors that once destroyed a proud and prosperous civilization, she was incredibly powerful despite having the appearance of a little girl, making for an extremely intense battle.

“So why were *you* captured?”

“Because I’m pretty.”

“.....”

“Because...I’m...pretty,” Sahara repeated, but Menou didn’t bother to react.

When Menou flashed her a death stare, Sahara reluctantly spoke again. “It was because of this.”

“Your arm...” Menou looked at the nun’s right hand.

She’d been wondering about this since they were first reunited. It appeared to be a highly functional prosthetic limb that moved almost perfectly with her body, but it was still clearly a temporary solution. Sahara didn’t have a prosthetic when they were in the monastery; she must have somehow lost her arm from the shoulder during the time they were apart.

Sahara moved her right arm, looking nonchalant. There was a small, proud smile on her face. “Oh yeah. Pretty cool, right?”

“...What’s up with this new personality? Is it your newest coping mechanism?”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve always been this way.”

That was obviously a lie. Menou frowned, looking at the artificial hand, which formed a peace sign.

“Anyway, this arm’s the other reason I asked for help. See, I was on the line of defense against the Mechanical Society in the eastern Wild Frontier. That’s how I lost my arm and ended up with this one.”

Menou caught her breath. “The Mechanical Society... Is that arm a piece of a conjured soldier, not a Guiding prosthetic?”

“Yep. So I want you to destroy the *Vessel* that’s attached itself to me. If nothing is done, this right arm is going to consume me and turn me into a conjured soldier. I gotta do something before that happens. And deal with those guys who captured me because of this arm while we’re at it.”

.....Menou silently got her thoughts in order. She knew what happened in the Mechanical Society. People were sometimes transformed into conjured soldiers there. Accepting Sahara’s proposal wasn’t the proper choice as an Executioner.

What she should do was kill Sahara, here and now.

“Are you gonna kill me?” Sahara looked back at her steadily. For some reason, this disturbed Menou.

“Do you have some other idea how to fix it?”

“I wanted to ask *you* that. I was hoping an Executioner might know something.”

“I think you’re aware, but...” After another moment of silent thought, Menou took a deep breath. “...My top priority is Akari.”

“I know.”

Sahara must have guessed by Akari’s appearance that she was a lost one with a Pure Concept power. She knew as well as Menou that activity related to Otherworlders was higher priority than any other crime.

“But here’s the thing, Menou: You two are going to be targets either way.” Sahara minced no words when pointing out the problem Menou was facing.

She was right, of course. Those men had attacked Menou before they came here. Not getting involved with them was no longer an option. Now that Akari had already been captured once, it would be unwise to try to keep moving without knowing what their enemy was planning.

“I found out while I was their captive that some knights are on the move investigating Iron Chain, too. If you team up with the knights, then the bad guys will only have two options: abandon their base and run or fight back for all they’re worth.”

Executing Archbishop Orwell in Grisarika Kingdom. Fending off Pandæmonium. With these accomplishments, which seemed larger than life, Flarette’s name was becoming widely feared in the dark side of society, for better or worse.

If this group found out that this Executioner had her eyes on them, they wouldn’t be able to ignore her.

“If they try to run, you can chase them down. The top brass might get away, but you’d still deal them a heavy blow.”

“And if they go on the offensive?”

“Then they’ll come at us with everything they’ve got. These guys don’t do things halfway, so if you play your cards right, you could probably wipe them all out.”

If they ran, that was more than acceptable. Even if the bosses were likely to escape, they could do enough damage to seriously hinder their activities. If they chose to fight back instead, it would be a tough battle, judging by what Menou had seen of their base. But Sahara was saying that if they teamed up with the knights, they should be able to win.

Either way, it certainly wasn’t any worse than Menou and Akari acting alone.

“This seems to be our new routine ever since I started traveling with Akari.”

Menou was an Executioner. This meant that she was usually on the offensive, hunting down taboos, but now she was on defense. *It’s like I’m a bodyguard now*, she thought with a sigh.

Of course, there was also the option of just making a break for it without looking back, but they weren’t in a great position to make that choice right now.

As long as she was traveling with Akari in this environment, it would be difficult to buy enough distance. If there was a chance they’d be targeted by another group of skilled attackers while trying to traverse the desert, they were better off stopping and dealing with the problem directly.

Which meant there was only one place they could go.

“Sahara. We’ll worry about your arm later, but for now, I imagine we should go to the oasis to find the knights investigating Iron Chain.”

“That seems reasonable.”

Imagining the map she’d memorized, Menou knew what their destination had to be. In the middle of the massive desert was a supply area with a special oasis.

The supply stop of the desert: Balar Oasis.

Menou picked up her scripture and opened it.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:4—Invoke [The Lord’s will is relayed through all of heaven and earth, reigning far and wide.]

Using her Guiding Force, she activated a communication conjuring used to send messages between linked scriptures. Menou's scripture was linked to that of Momo, her junior from the monastery and current aide. It wouldn't work if the other scripture was too far away, but by some stroke of luck, they were in range.

Sahara furrowed her brow as she saw the scripture communication, a technique exclusive to the Faust. "You're contacting Momo?"

"Of course. Our plans have changed, after all."

"...Would you mind not mentioning that I'm here?"

"Why not?"

"I thought you knew..." Sahara paused, looking serious. "Momo and I really don't get along."

"....."

"We really, *reeeally* don't get along," Sahara repeated emphatically.

Of course. Menou did remember this. To be honest, she had never seen Momo be friendly and open with anyone but Menou herself, but she was on exceptionally bad terms with Sahara. Menou knew this, including the reason for Momo's actions.

"If she finds out I'm here, she might even attack us herself. To punch me, that is."

"I don't...*think* she would do that..."

The two of them were on such bad terms that Menou couldn't even laugh and rule that out completely.

Momo was an outstanding assistant, but she did tend to get a tad emotional, especially when Menou was involved. And indeed, Menou herself was the very reason behind the bad blood between Momo and Sahara. Momo had told her as much.

"...I'll just tell her that I rescued a nun who was on a mission and agreed to help her. I won't mention your name. Sound good?"

“Great. As a token of my gratitude, I’ll let you use my body however you like. Pretty good deal, if I do say so myself.”

“Thanks for offering your labor. I’ll be sure to work you to your bones.”

“What a cruel misinterpretation...”

Menou ignored Sahara’s sorrowful expression, wrapping up her explanation of the situation to her aide with Guiding Force letters. The response was immediate, and she continued communicating with Momo via these messages. Within a few exchanges, they each understood the other’s situation and formulated a plan of action.

“Momo’s going to get in contact with a knight who should help us fight Iron Chain.”

“Cool.”

The last thing they needed was infighting. Menou sighed, exhausted by Sahara’s stubborn attitude toward Momo, and went back to the tent. Inside, Akari was still snoring away.

“...Akari. Wake up.”

“Mmn-awhuh...” Akari rolled over and issued an incomprehensible groan.

She still seemed nowhere near waking up.

Akari moved in her sleep and grabbed Menou’s arm before pulling it to her chest. Menou attempted to shake her off, but the slumbering girl only clung tighter. Akari cradled Menou’s arm, perhaps mistaking her for a body pillow.

Watching this heartwarming scene, Sahara leaned over and stage-whispered into Menou’s ear. “Boy, she’s really attached to you.”

“...Getting the target to trust me is part of the mission. If she had any doubts, she wouldn’t travel with me.”

“Now, that’s a pathetic excuse. Guess the rumors are true about you being a womanizer.”

Menou ignored Sahara.

In this position, she couldn’t even stand up straight. Without a word, Menou

used her free hand to grab Akari's cheek and give it a good tug.

"...Mn-ahh." Akari tossed and turned her head away. Her cheek escaped from Menou's grip, but she still didn't wake up.

Menou couldn't stop herself from chuckling at Akari's sleeping face and meaningless mumbling. She certainly was a heavy sleeper, and the events of last night couldn't have helped. Given how emotionally exhausted she must have been, it was small wonder that she wouldn't be able to wake up in the morning.

"But I can't let you sleep in."

They had to get to the oasis before noon.

Having let go of Akari's cheek, Menou flicked her nose instead. It was the easiest way to wake Akari when she was sleeping like a log, as she so often did.

"Awf?"

"Good morning to you, too."

Sure enough, Akari opened her eyes. Rubbing her nose, she sat up and looked at Menou sleepily.

"Morning, Menou. Is it time to get up alreadyyy? It's so earlyyy..."

"Yes, it's well past dawn. Setting out early is a basic rule of a pilgrimage... Besides, you don't want to walk through a desert in the middle of the afternoon. It's only logical to start walking before the sun beats down on us."

Menou prodded the girl's cheek for emphasis.

"I'm amazed you could sleep so soundly right after being kidnapped. You've got an indefatigable spirit, I'll give you that much."

"Well, sure, 'cause you were next to me... As long as Menou's with me, I'm safe..."

Akari was starting to nod off again. Even sitting up, sleepiness was still getting the best of her. It didn't take long before she slumped against Menou. Since Akari's body temperature was naturally higher, Menou felt her warmth.

"Mm, Menou, you're nice and cool..."

“Hello? Could you wake up already?”

“Mmmgh. Nooo thaaanks. You’re so nice, Menou... I’m sure you’ll let me rest a li’l mmwah...” She fell asleep partway through her sentence.

Going back to sleep was a complete waste of valuable time. Menou pinched Akari’s nose and held her lips shut for good measure. As she held on in the hopes that Akari would have to wake up if she couldn’t breathe, Sahara poked her head in.

“You’re so nice, she says. Maybe you could spare some niceness for me, too?”

“But I’m not.” Menou shook her head.

Nice was an extremely misguided way to describe her.

She’d been traveling with Akari for two months now. Menou was used to making some amount of contact with her targets, but her role was never to be a bodyguard.

She was an assassin.

Truthfully, Menou had dealt with most of her previous targets in a short amount of time. It wasn’t just fiendish villains who’d produced countless victims that were considered taboo entities. Any lost one like Akari who came from another world was a target as well, even if they had personally done nothing wrong.

“This girl’s a lost one, and you’re an Executioner... Should you really be getting so close?”

“Of course. It’s part of the mission.”

It wasn’t Sahara’s place to worry about this, especially when they’d just been reintroduced into each other’s lives. It was true that Menou had never spent time interacting with someone she was supposed to erase before, and her journey with Akari had been wildly unpredictable, even by the standards of an Executioner like Menou.

That just meant Menou knew all too well how dangerous a Pure Concept could be.

Pandæmonium, whom they’d encountered in Libelle, was the perfect

example. She was the very incarnation of evil, a Human Error that had forgotten even her own name. Even she was once an ordinary girl.

Pure Concepts mercilessly ate away at the Otherworlders who hosted them, stealing their memories and robbing them of personhood. One girl had even said that this phenomenon was the world's way of demanding Otherworlders to play a role, to bring about change.

Menou had to kill Akari. She had to put an end to everything while the girl was still herself.

She had to kill her for her own good.

But all that being said...

"...She refuses to wake up."

Menou was starting to worry a little that Akari might die of suffocation as she stubbornly clung to sleep.

Meanwhile... Having received the message from Menou and arrived early at the oasis to set about her business, Momo was in a foul mood.

Everything about her small frame radiated displeasure. Her eyes narrowed, her lips pouted, and she made no effort to hide it. Churning within her was the conflict between knowing what she had to do and wanting to do literally anything but that.

Generally speaking, Momo hated other people. It might even be accurate to describe her as misanthropic. She had never trusted anyone but Menou and never liked anyone but Menou, either.

Momo's job was to follow Menou on her journey and support her from the shadows. As a member of the Faust, an Executioner's aide, and most of all, as Menou's junior, Momo had never questioned her role.

She had just finally managed to make up for the time she lost being injured in Libelle. Now that her schedule was back on track, she was eager to do her job and do it right. She would never refuse a request from Menou. Momo wasted no time in rolling up her sleeves and getting right to work.

It didn't take long before she collected enough information to identify these

knights who would supposedly help them fight Iron Chain. And what's more, their leader was an acquaintance of Momo's.

In short, it was none other than Ashuna Grisarika.

Momo was torn. She and Ashuna had history. Putting aside her questions about what Princess-poo was doing here to begin with, Momo couldn't quite bring herself to approach her.

The reason was mostly that Momo simply hated Ashuna, but there was something else on her mind.

"I can't be the one to talk to Princess-poo first...!"

It was a matter of pride.

Thus far, every one of their encounters had been initiated by Ashuna. So what would happen if Momo, who had always expressed her displeasure about it, was the one to approach Ashuna this time? No matter how Momo made contact with her, no matter what reasons she gave, she could imagine Ashuna's delight all too clearly, and that was simply unbearable.

Who would want to make someone they hate happy?

Momo hated other people, especially Ashuna. If anything, she wished all the misfortune in the world upon her.

But she had no choice.

After several minutes of dawdling, Momo reminded herself that this was her mission and resolved to contact Ashuna strictly for business reasons. It was a painful choice, and she gave careful thought to what approach would annoy Ashuna the most. Momo put on a perfectly masked expression and approached the hotel where Ashuna was staying.

"What a pleasure to see you again, Your Highness."

"...?"

When she came to the door and Momo greeted her in the politest of tones, Ashuna blinked in confusion.

"Oh? Oh-ho-ho. Why, if it isn't Momo! Glad to see you're doing well. And

what a rare pleasure for you to approach me! But there's no need to hold back. You can call me Princess-poo like always!"

"Whatever do you mean? As one who serves the Lord, I should never speak so rudely to anyone. The Faust and the Noblesse both serve the Lord and thus sustain the social order. It is only tradition that we should approach each other with respect."

Momo entered the room and took a seat, still in her completely insincere business mode.

As misanthropic as she might be, Momo had a knack for keeping up appearances. Perhaps it was a result of her Executioner training, or simply a natural gift. Either way, she excelled at keeping her thoughts from showing on her face and putting on a flawless act.

"By the way, Momo..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"About that 'darling' of yours..."

"Watch your mouth, scum."

The act fell apart in an instant.

Ashuna grinned. "Now, that's more like it. Anyway, glad you're doing well."

"Tch... I *was* doing well until I laid eyes on you, Princess-poo. How're you going to make it up to me, hmm?" Momo openly scowled. "What in the world are you doing here anyway? Please don't tell me you're stalking us."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm usually the one who gets to places first. Chronologically speaking, it's you and your darling who show up after me. It doesn't make any sense for the late arrival to call *me* a stalker, now does it?"

Darling.

As Momo drummed her fingers on the table irritably, she furrowed her brow at this nickname.

She knew that Menou and Ashuna had fought together in Libelle, the city where Momo fell victim to poison. Since they had a common enemy, they

ended up joining forces.

But the fact that Ashuna was referring to Menou as darling made it obvious that Momo was the one who'd indirectly leaked Menou's information to the princess. That certainly rubbed Momo the wrong way.

"This time around, I do actually have business with your darling," Ashuna added.

"...What sort of business?"

"Hmm... Well, I suppose I can tell you, Momo." Ashuna thought for a moment, then explained her goal. "I don't know if you've heard on your travels, but a serious incident is going down in my homeland right now. Most information is being kept under wraps, but...the former Director of the Fourth has escaped from prison. And the person who orchestrated the escape was a girl of sixteen or seventeen with indigo hair in a braid, wearing a kimono."

"But that sounds like..."

"I know. Seems we should assume that Manon Libelle is still alive."

Momo's frown deepened. "But I was told she's dead."

Manon Libelle.

The mastermind who had wreaked havoc in the port city of Libelle. Momo, too, had gone through a considerable amount of stress because of her.

As far as Momo knew, however, Manon had died in the events that unfolded there. She doubted Menou would ever mistake the living for the dead.

"Yeah, she probably was. But Pandæmonium was with her when she died, right? From what I've gathered, Pandæmonium must have resurrected Manon as a demon...a Guiding Force life-form."

By definition, life required three components: body, soul, and spirit. It would be incredibly difficult to meddle with the almost miraculous equilibrium maintained between these three elements. Recreating them from scratch would be even more ridiculous.

But if anyone could do it, it would be Pandæmonium, one of the Four Major Human Errors. With her Pure Concept, she was capable of meddling with the

body, soul, and spirit like it was clay.

“I see. So she managed to preserve Manon Libelle’s soul and spirit from her corpse and create a new body with something else?”

“Seems that way.”

“Hrm.” Momo nodded, acting disinterested. On the inside, her mind was churning, trying to figure out what effect this fact would have on Menou.

“So, I wanted to meet your darling to give her that information, among other things. Could you contact her for me?”

“Excuse me? Why should I let you see my darling, Princess-poo? If you’ve got a message for her, just spit it out. I’ll pass it along.”

“Well, I’ve got the perfect spot. The Grisarika Kingdom owns some land right along the waterside of Balar Oasis. Want to come, Momo?”

Momo was already scowling at Ashuna’s suggestion, but that changed upon hearing where the land was located. Her attitude completely flipped, and she grasped Ashuna’s hand tightly.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been grateful for your existence, Princess-poo!”

In the western part of the continent was a beautiful city.

At the top of the Tower of Water—the source of the clear spring that provided for the residents of the city—was a garden. The structure was stunning enough from the outside, with the waterfall that flowed from all sides of it, but inside, the view was almost mystical.

A little farther above the stone floor of the rooftop, water arched over the surface and created a ceiling, seemingly produced from thin air. Through the blessing of the heavenly vein, not the earthen vein, this facility became a water source. It was an enormous remnant of ancient times and had been working for at least a thousand years.

At the very top, Manon Libelle strolled along the side.

“What a beautiful view.”

“Right? It’s nothing like that dusty old Mechanical Society. This place is far

more tasteful and beautiful.”

Walking alongside Manon, whose kimono sleeves were rippling in the wind, was a little girl—Pandæmonium, the very same girl who had been in the Wild Frontier on the eastern side of the continent just moments before.

“It’s so sparkly, like you could reach out and grab the light.”

“My, what a lovely turn of phrase.”

The little girl, who looked around ten years old, reached out her hand toward the water that formed a domed ceiling. Though her speech made her sound like a precocious child, she had a refined air about her. The two of them held hands as they walked through the rooftop garden.

Cloaked in water, the tower’s roof was a beautiful space detached from the noise of the world below. Beyond the flower beds overflowing with blossoms of every color, there was a grassy clearing that connected to a forest path where leaves swayed in the breeze.

Since the water source drew Guiding Force from the heavenly vein, there was an endless supply of rain made from sparkling Guiding Light. Up above, light shone through the clear, bubbling water, particles of brightness floating below the surface.

It was as beautiful as gazing up at the surface of the ocean from below.

A garden of water and sky, more captivating than the twinkling stars.

“This was well worth the long, arduous journey from Grisarika Kingdom.”

“You like pretty things, Manon.”

“Oh yes. I love beautiful things. Please remember that. I wouldn’t want you to forget.”

“Mm? Do you hate me, then?”

“Oh dear, why would that be?”

“Because I’m ugly, aren’t I?”

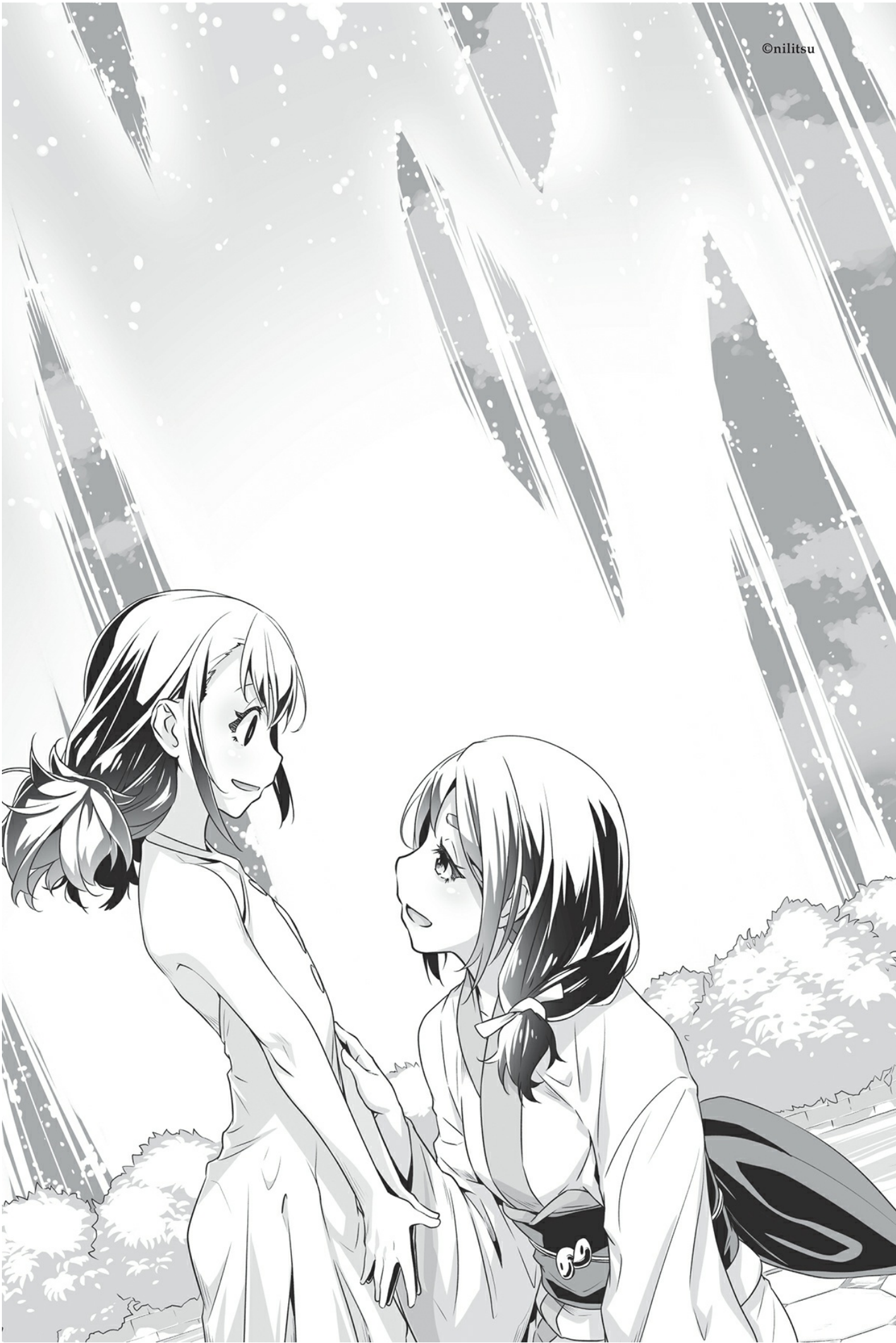
Manon stopped and looked at the girl. Then she broke into a warm smile, knelt down, and stared directly into the little girl’s eyes.

“You have it all wrong. I am capable of loving both extremes, and besides, I love you and the grotesque beauty that you conceal within you.”

“Mm, I’m happy to hear it.”

If anyone else were here to see them talking and smiling, they would probably assume the pair to be close-knit sisters.

Manon held Pandæmonium’s hand and led the way to the center of the garden. There was a small cottage and a table laid out with pastries and a tea set. Next to the spread stood a man who wore a black tailcoat and a monocle and looked to be in his mid-fifties. He politely welcomed Manon and Pandæmonium. Complete with a J-shaped cane, he looked like a perfect gentleman, but there was something suspicious about his smile.



“I hope the garden is to your liking.”

“Yes, very much so. I’m grateful that you’ve introduced us to such a wonderful place.”

“Oh-ho, I’m thrilled to hear it!”

This place was a still-functioning ancient relic and the source of the city’s water supply. The rooftop wasn’t accessible to just anyone. It was this man’s personal connections that allowed Manon to walk up here.

“I happen to know a few important people here who will do me a favor or two.”

“I can’t believe we got to see such a beautiful place... For the first time, I’m actually glad I broke you out of prison!”

“Think nothing of it. You two are already like daughters to me. Why, if you’d like to call me Daddy—er, did you say ‘the first time’?”

“Indeed! Ever since we met in Grisarika Kingdom, I’ve found your mannerisms so off-putting that I was thinking it might be best to part ways with you somewhere.”

The monocled man winced when Manon said that with an earnest smile. He cleared his throat to cover his shock. Then he smiled and abased himself to the girl who was young enough to be his daughter.

“Please refrain from saying such things, Miss Manon. Were it not for you, I would still be locked away in that dark prison. I only wish to repay you by showering you in all the love I would give my own daughter!”

“Yes, that’s what I find creepy.”

Her response was instant. This time, though, the Director simply nodded with a look of grave understanding.

“Ha-ha, I see now. You’re in your years of teen rebellion. It’s the duty of every father to see his daughter through such a phase, so I accept the challenge head-on.”

“Mm-hmm. That’s not even remotely the problem.”

Perhaps the people who locked away this perverse old man had the right idea? Uncharacteristically, Manon found herself slightly regretting her actions.

“At any rate, even if Archbishop Orwell has passed away, your ability to escape the notice of the eldest princess of Grisarika Kingdom is remarkable.”

“It was just a bit of luck and some help from my friend here. My contributions are hardly worth mentioning, Director.”

As she spoke, Manon cast a glance at Pandæmonium, who had already taken a seat and started digging into the pastries. She stuffed her cheeks with a scone and munched away, looking content.

Manon took her seat and reached for a pastry as well.

“Ha-ha-ha. No need to be modest. You’re the first person in a thousand years to walk hand in hand with one of the Four Major Human Errors. Though I would expect no less of my daughter. Magnificent!”

“Again, I’m not your daughter.”

Manon considered herself to be a faithful child to her parents. Yes, she had sacrificed her father, their entire clan, and their followers during the incident in Libelle, but that was unrelated. She was still determined not to acknowledge any fake parental bond with the Director.

“Shall we get started? You were so kind as to bring us to this lovely place, after all. We must put a stop to a certain person’s scheme, especially for the sake of Menou’s peaceful life.”

“An excellent proposal.” For the first time, the sleazy smile fell away from the Director’s face. “It’s well worth making an entire city into a trap if it means taking down that damned woman who threw me in prison and destroyed the ideals of the Fourth. Miss Manon, I do have one request.”

“What might that be?”

“As a reward for all this preparation, if you would call me Daddy just once—”

“Absolutely not.”

His shoulders slouching at the final rejection, the Director trudged away from the garden, and Manon shook her head as she watched him go.

“Hrmm. Maybe it was a bad idea to free him after all?”

“You think so? He’s kind of entertaining.”

She might have been indifferent to blood and gore, but Manon’s heart was somehow still too delicate to deal with a pervert. As she voiced her thoughts, a large dog appeared, as if to replace the man who had just left.

It was an intelligent-looking animal, but oddly enough, it set its sights on the innocent little girl and growled. Then, with a howl, it leaped toward the frail child.

Pandæmonium was pulled down to the ground with little resistance.

The dog was around as tall as a human, and given how savagely it was attacking, it would be impossible for such a small girl to fight back. No matter how much it pushed her down and snapped its teeth at her, Pandæmonium neither screamed nor resisted. Her calmness was downright unnatural, but the dog didn’t notice in the throes of its primal hunting instincts.

It tore into the girl’s flesh. As if possessed, the dog devoured the little girl, leaving not a single speck behind.

“Manon, you can handle the rest, right?”

“Yes. Just leave it to me.”

The devoured child’s voice spoke to Manon, who nodded. From this moment on, a true atrocity would unfold before them. After all, Pandæmonium’s flesh and blood were the Pure Concept of *Evil*.

With an innocence that cared nothing for ethics, the little girl wished only for chaos and used her power to make her twisted visions reality.

Having consumed the little girl’s body, the dog left the tower and disappeared into the city. This animal would be patient zero of a new epidemic. What would happen next? Pandæmonium had already explained to Manon the tragic events awaiting them.

“And this is for faraway Menou...”

Though the other girl would likely never feel the same way—and in fact might very well find it a ridiculous nuisance—Manon sincerely considered Menou to

be a dear friend.

Which was why she was genuinely doing this for Menou's sake.

"I suppose it's time to destroy this city."

Menou and Akari.

Manon threw the first stone intended to derail their fate.

The first time Menou met that child was during training at the monastery.

"Wow."

They were practicing barehanded martial arts. The sparring match between children ended swiftly in Sahara's victory.

"You're surprisingly weak."

Menou wasn't particularly angry when the girl with the sleepy eyes called her that.

It would be difficult to describe Menou's combat results as exceptional by any stretch of the imagination. In a monastery full of girls who had been chosen as the cream of the crop, Menou's abilities were below average. When she'd first arrived, especially, she rarely won in sparring matches.

On the other hand, Sahara's skills were at the top among the other children.

"Well, you're..."

"What?"

"You're strong."

"No, you're just weak."

Sahara didn't say that to be rude; she was just making a simple statement, expressing a kernel of truth.

"I hate you, you know. You look like you don't care about yourself." Sahara stood up and stared down at Menou, who was still sitting. *"You don't worry about your own safety because you're indifferent to yourself. You can face death without hesitation because nothing in your life has ever mattered to you."*

Her short silver hair swayed.

“Casual self-sacrifice. There’s nothing special about that.”

“I don’t...understand.”

Sahara seemed disappointed by Menou’s response. She drew herself up, sounding annoyed. *“I’m not like you. I’m going to be special.”*

She had big dreams, an abrasive attitude, no reservations about kicking someone else down, and most of all, she’d despised Menou on sight.

“Don’t get full of yourself just because Master Flare has her eye on you.”

That was what the girl called Sahara was like.

At least, she used to be.

But the current Sahara was so different from the one in Menou’s memories that she was seriously troubled.

The glaring heat. The scorching sun beating down on them mercilessly from above. In the world of golden sand that surrounded them, Menou was battling with something far more exhausting than the sunlight.

“Allow me to reintroduce myself. I’m Sahara the nun. Menou and I share a long, intimate history.”

Just listening to this made Menou want to punch her to shut her up.

Menou considered herself to have a fair amount of self-restraint, but something about Sahara’s bizarre behavior irritated her. She was surprised at the strength of her violent urges.

“Sahara. Got it. I’m Akari. Nice to meet you.”

As Sahara grinned at her, Akari turned toward Menou. Her smile was strangely stiff, like a painted doll.

“.....Well? What’s the story, Menou?”

“There’s nothing to tell.” It was baseless nonsense. Menou had nothing to feel guilty about. “You can’t take anything Sahara says seriously. Just ignore her and...”

“Don’t worry, Akari.”

Every time Menou tried to resolve things peacefully, Sahara butted in and made things more complicated.

“I know lots of stories about Menou’s younger days. So I’m sure we can get along.”

“Let’s be friends, Sahara!” Akari took the obvious bait hook, line, and sinker.

This newfound alliance spelled all kinds of trouble to Menou. If she left them to their own devices, things might take a turn in the wrong direction, so Menou forcefully interrupted the two of them.

“Hey, Akari, are you holding up all right?”

“Ehhh... I was excited about the desert at first, but it’s pretty clear that this is no place for humans. I’m beat.”

They trudged through the desert, the sand sinking even under the girls’ light weight and leaving behind footprints.

“Well, of course. It’s part of the Wild Frontier because people can’t live here.”

“Riiight...”

Since the air was so dry, the heat wouldn’t be unbearable if one could only avoid the sunlight. To put it another way, though, the sunlight was what made things bad. The girls were wearing hooded robes for their journey through the desert, without which, it would be even worse.

“What about you, Sahara? Is your arm all right?”

“Yeah, more or less. It’s kinda like ‘be careful, ’cause if you touch me, you might get burned, little kitten.’”

“That doesn’t sound all right to me...”

The prosthetic arm did appear to be metal. On top of being heavy, it might actually burn the flesh it was attached to.

It had been three days since they entered the desert. Even Akari was running out of energy; her speech lacked its usual level of excitement. Early that morning, she had been almost annoyingly clingy, but even she apparently didn’t want to touch someone else in the scorching desert heat.

“Can you make a nice cool breeze with magic or something, Menou? I need something cool... Share your coolness with me.”

“It’s conjuring, not magic. And as I keep telling you, conjurings are limited by prewritten restrictions. You can’t just make whatever you want. If you try to force it, you’ll face a proportionate amount of backlash.”

“Meaning?”

“She can’t conjure up cool air without any preparation. Sorry you can’t cool off.”

“Gotcha...”

Once Sahara summed things up, Akari’s shoulders slumped.

Conjurings were not an unlimited source of miracles. Many people who couldn’t use them misunderstood this, not just Otherworlders like Akari. It was more like a technological system, one that could only be used following strict rules and regulations that had been studied for safety. Conjuring used crestology and materialogy as a foundation to draw forth specific phenomena from various Concept Dimensions. It was especially dangerous to try to handle large amounts of power, and it certainly couldn’t be done without any preparation.

As Akari slouched unhappily, Sahara offered some comfort.

“It’s not a good idea to rely too much on conjurings. Remember what Menou said about backlash? What you see here is backlash from a conjuring, too.”

“Hrmm? What’s this desert got to do with conjuring?”

“Lots. It’s said that this area was once used for some large-scale conjuring experiments. One of them failed and resulted in dragonblight.”

“Dragonblight? ...What’s that?”

As an Otherworlder, it was only natural that Akari wasn’t familiar with the phenomena unique to this world. Menou frequently taught her such knowledge during their conversations, but of course she hadn’t learned everything.

“Most large-scale conjurings use the earthen vein,” Menou explained now. “More power than any human can supply is required for the Guiding trains that

run to circulate money and goods, functions that protect city facilities, and so on.”

“Oh yeah. The earthen vein is that thing, right? The thing you tap into once in a while when you use a special move.”

“A ‘special move’... Well, I suppose that’s close enough.”

Akari’s understanding seemed a little off, but it wasn’t worth the effort to correct her. By normal standards, Menou was blessed with a considerable amount of Guiding Force, but she was still within the realm of an ordinary person. When she invoked large-scale conjurings, she sometimes drew out the power of the earthen vein to make up for the Guiding Force she lacked.

“Long ago, there was an experiment here using the earthen vein, and it came undone in this area and caused a devastating amount of damage. The result is this barren desert. There’s no flow of the earthen vein around here anymore, you see.”

It was said that without the power that flowed through the earth, this area had become an infertile wasteland. Naturally, that also meant Menou couldn’t access the earthen vein to provide extra Guiding Force like she had in the ancient capital of Garm or the port city of Libelle.

“...So without the earthen vein, areas become deserts?”

Akari looked even more confused; evidently, that explanation didn’t get through to her.

I suppose that’s fair enough, Menou thought, looking for another way to explain things. Dragonblight was a universally understood phenomenon in this world, but it was uncharted territory to someone who was summoned from another world.

“It’s more like not having the earthen vein makes it difficult for life to exist here...which reminds me, have I explained the definition of *life* in this world to you yet?”

“The definition of *life*...? That sounds philosophical.”

“Here, it’s fairly straightforward. The definition of *life* is ‘a soul and spirit

contained within a body.’ The three elements can be configured in any way; the definition is unchangeable.”

“Question, Professor Menou!”

“Yes, my student?”

“I understand the body, but not the soul or spirit!”

“I thought as much.” Menou had already taken that into consideration. “The role of the soul is to produce power, and the spirit’s role is to independently control that power. Incidentally, a body is the vessel that contains those two things. In this world, the source of life is thought to be power—meaning Guiding Force.”

All life activity was the work of Guiding Force.

“The soul is the source, the spirit is the helm, and the body is the vessel of that power. In this world, anything without Guiding Force isn’t alive at all.”

This still didn’t seem to click with Akari, who screwed up her face and tilted her head to the side. Menou smiled wanly as she watched this and moved on to her conclusion.

“So even if the body is inorganic, if it has a spirit and soul, it’s still considered a life. And a dragon is formed when a soul and spirit dwell in the earthen or heavenly veins and become autonomous without a body.”

“I guess that kinda makes sense, but how big of a scale are we talking?”

“How big? Well, let’s see...”

Menou had never actually witnessed a dragonblight for herself. In fact, even Menou, who had witnessed many horrific scenes in her life, didn’t want to encounter one.

Well, how can I explain this...? She tapped her chin.

“We talked about the monster in Libelle, right?”

“Yeah,” Akari replied.

Menou’s example was an enormous monster that had destroyed an entire island just by appearing. It was so huge that one couldn’t even look at the entire

thing from up close.

“So imagine enormous clusters of Guiding Force around that size swarm together, fly through the sky, and destroy everything in sight. Guiding Force life-forms have bodies made out of power, so they’re essentially immortal, like demons.”

“Whoa... Wait, what? So how do you beat them?”

“You don’t,” Menou answered simply.

Life-forms made of Guiding Force could be broadly divided into three categories: demons, phantoms, and dragons. Though they were created in different ways, they were all beings of power and supernatural, immortal creatures with wills of their own. Dragons, especially, were unbelievably powerful.

“You just have to watch and wait until they settle down on their own. It depends on the scale, of course, but there are precious few examples of anyone stopping dragonblight. Fortunately, I suppose, dragons only exist in places where the earthen vein has come undone, so the easiest solution is to evacuate.”

Incidentally, Archbishop Orwell, whom Menou fought in Garm, was one leading figure who had stopped a dragonblight. That accomplishment had helped propel her to the top.

Dragonblights were a different kind of disaster from Pure Concepts gone wrong.

Still..., Menou thought.

In Libelle, Pandæmonium had mentioned a *Dragon* in the west. She said it was the Sword of Salt that had destroyed the Pure Concept of *Dragon*. Menou intended to try to use that to execute Akari.

“This must be a coincidence... Or at least, I hope it is.”

Perhaps even the dragonblights that had dealt damage to many places throughout history were part of a Human Error. As she was mentally exploring this possibility, the air suddenly changed.

It wasn't the dry, throat-scratching air of a desert anymore. Moisture clung to her skin. Looking at the horizon, beyond the one-note world of sand, she saw lush greenery that could protect them from the glaring sun.

The oasis in the center was creating this pleasant new change.

It was a lake far larger than one would expect to see in the middle of a desert—the supply stop, Balar Oasis.

“Anyway, we need an inn. Then we can ask around for information and do a little sightseeing in the process.”

“Huh? The first thing we usually do is visit the church. Why aren't we doing that this time?”

“There's no church in this town, Akari,” said Sahara. “None of the Noblesse, either, by the way.”

“Oh really?”

Sahara was correct, although Akari probably wouldn't understand how strange it was for a town to lack any members of the Faust or Noblesse. So *what?* her face seemed to say.

“The crux of it is that this town is in the Wild Frontier, which means it's not part of any nation. The town of Balar is sometimes said to have been created by adventurers. Common law doesn't apply here, either.”

“Whoa! A town of adventurers? Now, that's kind of exciting!”

“How so?” Menou smiled politely, tilting her head. Adventurers were basically ruffians of the Commons. Her statement about them was supposed to be a warning, but Akari seemed to have taken it the wrong way.

“Well, it's not as unsafe as it sounds, so we should be fine,” Menou continued. “They're very open to travelers, since it's a town made by and for adventurers and an oasis in the desert. Even though it's in the middle of the Wild Frontier, it's an important midpoint for distribution, so there are rarely any disturbances that would affect outsiders like us.”

“Well, now you've jinxed it. We better be careful.”

“I know what you mean. Menou kinda tends to walk right into clichés.”

Sahara and Akari were bonding over some strange mutual observation. Menou decided to ignore them.

Once they booked a room at an inn, Menou and the two girls went to get food.

The spicy scent from the street stalls made them even hungrier. There were outdoor tables and chairs, complete with parasols to protect diners from the sunlight.

Menou, Sahara, and Akari sat at one of these tables.

“So yeah, Menou had a totally different personality as a kid. She was super spacy and weird. It made you just wanna whisk her away somewhere.”

“Wow!” Akari exclaimed at Sahara’s borderline-criminal comments as they nibbled on some meat. “Man, I wanna see little Menou, too! I wonder if I could find a photo or anything...!”

“I’m afraid I couldn’t use recording conjurings at the time, Akari... Although I suspect someone else might have sneaked a few.”

“You mean there might really be some childhood images of Menou around?!”

“Sadly, we wouldn’t be able to peruse them. Even in this world, there are violent monsters who would prevent such a thing.”

“...Could you two drop this nonsense already?” Menou glowered at the pair as they excitedly chatted about her.

It was still early for the lunchtime rush, so the place was fairly empty. Aside from the three girls, there was a young man thoroughly cloaked in a thick leather robe eating alone at a table behind them.

Robes with hoods to block out the sunlight were extremely common here. When they were walking in the desert, Menou and Akari wore similar clothes, though they had changed to their regular clothes, since they were in the shade here.

“Forget the past—let’s talk about the present, Akari. Isn’t there anything you can do about your oversleeping habits? Is it just me, or has it gotten even worse lately? You’re letting your guard down.”

“I don’t think there’s anything I can do about that. When I wake up, all I care about is how sleepy I am.”

“I get that,” Sahara chimed in. “Sleep is more important than anything else. The dream you’re having matters more than your plans for the day. And sound sleep matters more than keeping watch. Right?”

“Right!”

The two human sloths clasped hands with each other.

“If I had to pick something that could win out against sleepiness, it’d be Menou. So if you give me a little wake-up kiss, then I’ll be out of bed in no time!”

“I see you’re still dreaming even in the middle of the afternoon. I pity you.”

“Mrr. Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it! Here, I’ll show you how effective it— ouchie!”

Akari leaned in toward Menou, who flicked her nose. The black-haired girl gave her a teary-eyed look of reproach, but Menou pretended not to notice as she took another bite.

“...Wow, you two really are close.”

“Of course we are! Menou’s my best friend!”

“I’d say *you two* have gotten pretty close in such a short time, too,” Menou observed.

“Of course. Me and Akari share a common interest.”

They were about halfway through their food when their conversation was interrupted. A group of men stomped into Menou’s view, placing an order at a food cart.

“Nice, it’s empty here.”

“Bet it’ll get busy soon. Came at a good time.”

“Yeah, guess it’s kinda early for lunch.”

They chatted boisterously as they took their food and debated over where to sit. Menou kept watch on them out of the corner of her eye.

There were three men in total. Judging by their muscles and equipment, they seemed familiar with fighting. All three wore leather breastplates and carried weapons engraved with crests. Traditionally, no one but the Order of Knights from the Noblesse was allowed to carry a weapon in public, but that rule didn't apply in the Wild Frontier.

This area didn't belong to any nation, after all. There was no point trying to enforce their laws here.

"Damn, I'm starv—oh-ho?"

As one of the men went to sit in an empty seat, his eyes landed on Menou and her companions.

In a way, this was inevitable. Menou's combination of beauty and composure was enough to catch anyone's eye, regardless of age or gender. And while her gorgeous looks alone were normally admired from afar, her soft expression when she spoke with Akari made her look more approachable.

On top of that, Akari was a lovely girl herself, with her adorably youthful facial features. Her noticeably large chest was eye-catching in a different way from Menou. And then there was Sahara, who looked like a subdued beauty as long as she didn't open her mouth.

"Hey, ladies. Why not have a seat with us?"

This was one of the few oases in the desert. It was bad form to cause trouble at such a supply stop, but these men weren't exactly highly principled by nature. They started boldly calling out to the three beautiful young women.

"We just finished work, but it's boring as hell unwinding with just guys. Why don'tcha share a table with us? We're not gonna pull anything weird, I swear."

This was probably intended more to tease them than as a serious invitation; their real goal was simply to mess with some young women as entertainment to go with their drinks. The man's friends guffawed, while the one who had spoken up moved closer to the girls, emboldened by his friends' cheers and jeers.

Menou didn't sense any more sinister motives, but he was bothering them.

"Weh..." Akari hid behind Menou with fearful eyes. Even after the incidents

she'd been caught up in so far, the young girl couldn't get used to violence. Just the sight of a burly man moving toward them was enough to elicit terror for her. Sahara didn't seem particularly bothered and kept blithely eating her food.

Menou didn't panic, either. She simply put down her fork to free up her right hand.

Evidently deeming them a group of harmless young girls, the man brazenly sat down in an open seat at their table.

"You're a little too young for my tastes, but in a few years, you'll all be real lookers. If ya keep us company while we eat, we'll treat ya to—"

"I have to say, this seems downright unnatural."

"Hunh?"

As the man grunted in confusion at being interrupted, the air suddenly chilled.

A blade was being held to the man's throat.

"You're trying to pick us up because we're girls, yet you don't touch on the fact that I'm wearing priestess robes. What are you doing?"

It took less than a second for Menou to produce the dagger from the belt hidden on her thigh and press it to the man's throat. To a non-combatant like Akari, it probably even looked as if the dagger had appeared in Menou's hand out of nowhere.

The man seemed taken aback that a knife had come into play in response to him shooting his shot. He responded in a hoarse voice. "W-wait a minute. Just 'cause you're a priestess doesn't mean we really—"

"Answer the question."

The tip of the blade pricked against his throat, piercing the skin and just barely touching the artery beneath without actually damaging any blood vessels. If Menou's hand twitched even slightly, blood would spray everywhere.

This was definitely an overreaction to an only slightly ill-intended pickup attempt.

The crash of breaking glass echoed.

Akari flinched at the sudden noise, while Sahara glanced at the source. The young man who'd been sitting alone at a table turned pale and dropped his glass, evidently shocked by the threat of imminent bloodshed.

Unlike the other two's reactions to the shattering glass, Menou didn't move her blade an inch. With her command over her body, she was too unwavering to be affected by outside interruptions. A little noise wasn't enough to make her hand move.

"I have heard that petty criminals abound in the central Wild Frontier. It makes sense that an oasis in the middle wouldn't exactly be safe, I suppose."

There were bound to be some individuals who got foul ideas when three young women showed up in such a place, especially when each of them was a beauty of a different type. They would draw in men whether they wanted to or not—if Menou wasn't clearly wearing a priestess robe.

"In such a lawless place, why would anyone be foolish enough to approach a priestess of their own accord, assuming they can handle it just because we're women?"

Priestesses were strong. Anyone involved in evil deeds was bound to be especially aware of the power of a priestess chosen by the Faust.

People who were up to no good would avoid priestesses like the plague.

There had to be some reason this man tried to approach them anyway. It was possible that he was truly just that stupid, but these men seemed more rational than that. In spite of their coarse manners and attitudes, they still made the barest effort to be sensible in what they said. Even if they were starved for female company, they should have enough common sense to avoid a priestess.

And yet, they didn't. The most natural conclusion was that their efforts to approach the girls were an act.

"I've had a feeling about this since yesterday."

By this point, the men's faces had lost all emotion.

Aside from the two who were still at their own table, even the man with the

knife at his throat was almost eerily expressionless, without a trace of fear. Three cold gazes focused on Menou.

“You’re with those kidnappers, aren’t you?”

“Tch!”

The other two men shifted into action despite the knife at their comrade’s throat, jumping up and grabbing their weapons. Their lack of concern for their own lives was just like the kidnappers’ from the day before.

Killing one of them wouldn’t scare them off. Gauging that the time it would take to slaughter him could cost her the fight, Menou withdrew her weapon from the man in front of her. As she jumped back to put some distance between them, Sahara stepped up in her place. She blocked a sword strike from one of the men with her artificial right arm.

There was the sharp clang of metal hitting metal.

“Oof, felt that one in the shoulder,” Sahara grumbled, her eyes still looking half-asleep as she parried the sword.

Her prosthetic arm was made of steel and propelled by a Guiding Force connection. Since the Faust carried scriptures in their left hands, they favored weapons that could be used with just the right arms. Sahara’s weapon was her steel prosthetic arm itself.

She used it to push off the sword, sending the man stumbling a few steps.

“...You’ve got some nerve drawing a sword on me.”

“Huh? Stay out of it, twerp.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

As she half-listened to their exchange, Menou charged her dagger with Guiding Force and began to construct a conjuring. There were three men in front of her with blades at the ready, but there was another, more pressing target Menou had to deal with first.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

Before the men could correct their stances, she invoked the crest conjuring.

Then Menou threw her dagger—and aimed it directly behind her.

“Gah!”

A groan rang out. The dagger Menou had thrown without looking hit the young man at the table behind them directly on the hand. A Guiding gun tumbled out of his robes. Menou tugged on the Guiding Force thread connected to the hilt of her dagger, pulling it back into her hand.

The young man who’d seemed so alarmed to be caught up in this crisis was actually working with the other men. He was using his full-body robe to ready a Guiding gun underneath. No doubt the plan was for him to shoot Menou from behind while she was distracted by the attackers.

“I told you it seemed unnatural.”

There were four opponents in total. Menou held her dagger at the ready, watching them.

She had guessed that the real attack would come from elsewhere precisely because the man approached them so blatantly. It was clear to her that their act, including Menou seeing through it, was part of a bigger attack plan.

Even the men who put on an act to approach them were just decoys. The real attacker was the seemingly unimportant young man at the other table. Ironically, it was because their coordination was so flawless that Menou was able to predict the intended surprise attack from her blind spot.

“Flurette... I should’ve expected no less.”

Without a glance at his dropped Guiding gun, the young man slid over to stand with the other three attackers. He appeared to be their leader. Any pretense of being an innocent bystander was now gone completely. His cold, reptilian eyes fixed on Menou.

“Bringing down the dragonblight suppressor Archbishop Orwell. Fending off one of the Four Major Human Errors, Pandæmonium. I assumed these were exaggerated rumors, but it looks like there was something to them after all.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” Menou shrugged lightly, trying to change the subject.

Akari knew about those two instances already, so that was all well and good, but there was a chance that he might reveal more about Menou's identity. She was still hiding the fact she was an Executioner from Akari.

"Don't suppose you'd hand that girl over quietly?"

"I'll have to decline. What about you? Would you be willing to surrender and repent for your sins?"

"Let me tell you a little something."

Such inhumanly cold eyes, Menou thought, then noticed something. The young man's right eye was an extremely well-crafted prosthetic.

Menou raised her level of caution toward this man. For taboo researchers, people from the underworld, and the like, artificial parts weren't always just making up for a loss. They were sometimes put in to hide special Guiding vessels.

"Our group works directly under Genom Cthulha."

"Genom Cthulha?" Menou's eyes widened at the name.

That was an unexpectedly big name. Sahara hadn't said anything about Iron Chain being linked to Genom. Or maybe she didn't know, either.

But Menou's surprise only showed for a second.

"...I see. And?"

Aside from their young leader, the other men wavered slightly, looking surprised that the threat didn't work.

Menou narrowed her eyes coolly. "Genom Cthulha. A frightful name, to be sure. If he was really here, I imagine I would never be able to win."

Akari, who was holding her breath, looked shocked. From her point of view, it must have sounded like an uncharacteristic show of weakness for Menou.

But Menou meant every word.

Genom Cthulha: also known as Arms Dealer, Priestess Slayer, and Primary Color Killer, among countless other aliases. His name was carved into the top of the wanted list across the continent.

Though he was known as a villain who had wreaked havoc across countless nations, he eventually ventured into the eastern Wild Frontier, where few humans dared tread. He was feared as a monster born of the Commons and considered the strongest individual on this continent.

If they fought head-to-head, even Menou most likely couldn't compete.

"But he won't be leaving the eastern Wild Frontier."

It was a famous story.

Genom Cthulha succeeded in the previously unknown feat of traversing the eastern Wild Frontier, but he was captured by the Mechanical Society in the process. Since he was one of the key pillars of the Fourth, his being trapped in the eastern Wild Frontier was said to be one of the major factors that led to the capture of the Director and even the fall of the Fourth.

"If he's unable to come here even if I wipe you out, there's nothing frightening about just hearing his name. If you're going to claim to have someone's protection, at least choose someone who can actually come to your aid."

"You're saying we're not a threat? Sure, he probably won't be comin' himself. But you can't be clueless enough not to know what it means that we have his support."

"I suppose..."

Perhaps their claim that their organization worked for Genom wasn't just a bluff. That would certainly explain their unusually good equipment.

Frighteningly enough, Genom had an alliance with the Mechanical Society and sent high-quality armor and weapons to the organizations that worked for him. While he couldn't leave the Mechanical Society himself, he used these groups to spread his reign of terror.

Menou knew all this, and yet she smiled fearlessly.

"Why don't we find out?"

The tension in the air spiked immediately.

Both sides were ready for a fight. As Menou and the young man glared at

each other, the air grew heavier around them. The tension stretched to its very limits, reaching the hardness of glass that threatened to break at the slightest movement.

Menou continued glaring at the enemy, careful to keep her guard up.

While she was keeping up an insolent attitude so they wouldn't underestimate her, these men were certainly not opponents to make light of. There was no comparison here to the Fourth cronies they'd fought in the port city of Libelle; these men were skilled enough to rival the knights she'd battled in Grisarika Kingdom.

Could she fight them while protecting Akari without getting hurt? Even Menou wasn't sure.

Both sides were ready to lunge into battle at any moment.

"Genom can't leave the eastern Wild Frontier, hmm?" the young man murmured thoughtfully.

His gaze drifted away from Menou. While his false eye didn't move, his left eye settled directly on Sahara.

"Who knows how long that'll be the case?"

Menou's eyebrow twitched. Before she could ask what he meant, the young man stepped back.

"We're leaving."

With that quiet command, the men immediately retreated in different directions.

Menou started forward instinctively but quickly decided against giving chase. Even if her enemies' backs were turned, she couldn't leave Akari behind.

"Whew..." Akari heaved a sigh of relief as the tension drained from the air. "I was sooo scared. What was the deal with those guys anyway? Frightening..."

"Yeah, agreed. What kinda guys would pick on helpless young ladies?"

Although Sahara agreed with Akari, she wasn't shaken in the slightest. Equally relieved that they had managed to resolve things peacefully, Menou took the

last bite of her food.

After the incident at lunch, Menou brought Akari to the meeting place Momo had designated.

She had no reason to bring Akari along to meet up with the knights who were chasing the Iron Chain executives, but she couldn't leave her alone, especially after they were just attacked. Sahara, meanwhile, decided to go off on her own as soon as she heard Momo might be there.

"It's a pleasure to have you. I heard all about it from the young mistress."

The meeting place was a white-painted pension near the waterfront of the oasis. When they arrived, a young lady in a maid outfit came out to welcome them, evidently the hostess.

The maid outfit's design looked strangely familiar. As Menou racked her brain, the maid led them inside, where she smiled and opened a large closet.

"Here, a change of clothes for you. Please take your time."

The bland smile Menou had been wearing froze on her face.

The closet was full of swimsuits.

"...Excuse me?"

Why were they being offered swimsuits to meet up with the knights? Something wasn't adding up.

"Why are you offering us these?"

"Whatever do you mean? This is a private beach, of course. Or did you bring your own swimsuits?"

Menou felt like they were being forced into some strange form of harassment, but the maid seemed equally puzzled by her question.

This didn't clear anything up, however. If anything, Menou was even more confused.

"A private beach?"

Momo hadn't written a single word about that.

This had to be some kind of mistake. And yet, Akari's eyes were already sparkling.

"Splish-splashing with Menou in a swimsuit on a private beach...!"

For some reason, her expectations were clearly creeping in a strange direction.

By the time Menou thought *oh no*, it was already too late. In fact, she now realized after the fact why the maid outfit looked so familiar.

It was a maid outfit from Grisarika Kingdom.

Menou herself had worn one before, albeit altered by Momo, so there was no mistaking it. This was the very same uniform that maids wore in the royal palace of Grisarika.

Servants in Grisarika Kingdom uniforms maintained this building.

There was the mention of a "young mistress."

And someone had the nerve to designate their meeting at a private beach.

At this point, it was obvious who was waiting to meet them.

Menou quickly looked around. As she searched for an exit, someone tightly grabbed her arm.

"Menou. Don't be selfish, okay? We have business here, remember?"

Akari's excitement had completely closed off any means of escaping.

Menou stood on the sandy beach in a swimsuit.

Between the hot sunlight and the clear water, swimming at the oasis made for a very pleasant pastime. Since it was in a desert area, the water was always warm, and the sand underfoot was downright scorching. If the sun weren't a bit too strong, it might even be the perfect place for a beach day.

Leaving the white pension behind, they were surrounded by tall trees in every direction. A girl who appeared to be part of the staff here was standing in the open space past the building, wearing a white swimsuit and a straw hat that covered her face as she prepared some brightly colored drinks.

It was, without a doubt, a private beach.

“Well, I guess that’s all well and good...”

Menou hadn’t protested because she was embarrassed to wear a swimsuit or anything. She simply didn’t like being compelled to leave most of her weapons and equipment behind.

“I wonder if that was actually the real reason all along...”

It was a forced explanation, but at least it made more sense to her.

Building a private swimming area in the water source of an oasis was an unbelievable level of extravagance. Who would be rich and powerful enough to occupy part of an oasis? Menou already had a good idea of the answer as she felt the sand under her bare feet.

Dressed for the beach, Menou wore a bikini-style swimsuit with a sarong wrapped around her waist. As if her figure wasn’t pleasing enough to the eye, her small facial features seemed to push her to another level. The line of her slim waist and long legs made for a gorgeous sight and a stunningly well-balanced silhouette.

And she wasn’t alone.

“Menou! Well? What d’you think of my beach bod?” Akari came running up behind her.

She wore a bikini trimmed with adorable frills. Her skin looked soft and supple, without a single blemish. Her baby-faced features contrasted with her busty figure. As she flounced across the sand, the lines of her legs were so sensual, it was almost scandalous. All in all, the swimsuit fully drew out Akari’s charms in a different way from Menou’s.

Showing off her swimsuit, Akari looked at Menou with her eyes sparkling in obvious anticipation of praise.

Menou reached out silently, pinched Akari’s stomach, and tugged on it, stretching out her soft stomach fat.

Akari’s smile froze. Menou quietly looked up and gave a small nod.

“.....”

“.....”

They exchanged looks. Silence fell between the two girls. But it didn't change reality. The flesh Menou pinched was undoubtedly stretching. That was all that mattered.

“.....Maybe you could stand to lose weight?”

“That's the worst reaction I could've ever imagined...!”

It was a critical hit.

The sheer force of the fearless answer shot down Akari's excitement and sent her dropping to her knees on the sandy beach.

“Lose w...wait, what? I'm not that chubby, am I? Compared to other girls back in Japan, I was...huh? What was I, again? I can't remember the average... How exactly did I...? What *is* normal...?”

“You're still within an acceptable range. But if you let your guard down, that squishy belly of yours will get out of control in no time.”



“Menou... Menou, you...have an amazing figure. It’s like the ideal shape, without a single flaw...! A perfect body...!”

“Thanks.”

As Akari touched her arms and stomach, despairing at the difference between them, Menou shrugged. She simply had far more training and exercise under her belt. Compared to Akari’s squishable body, Menou’s skin was far more smooth and bouncy. It was debatable which one felt better, but as far as who was closest to ideal proportions, Menou had a clear advantage.

“Weh... Now I feel embarrassed for showing so much skin out in public... Why did my past self think it was a good idea to try to get Menou to fall for me in a swimsuit?”

“Because you’re an idiot?” Menou voiced her thoughts upon hearing Akari’s superficial plan. “You have no self-control and get carried away in the moment. Exhibit a little more self-restraint.”

“I knooow, but...!”

As Akari belatedly turned red and covered her stomach, Menou mercilessly dealt the final blow.

“If you’re embarrassed, you ought to go swimming. You’ll burn some fat that way.”

“Fiiiine.”

Menou watched Akari slouch gloomily toward the water, then headed toward the pension. Now that she’d managed to chase Akari away, she approached the girl holding drinks.

“Two drinks, please. Anything will do.”

“Right awaaaay.” The girl in the straw sun hat and white one-piece swimsuit met Menou’s gaze, her pink hair waving in the wind.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she pressed her hands together.

“You look sooo amazing in your swimsuit, darliiing...!”

The girl in the cute swimsuit was none other than Momo.

As she gazed hotly at Menou, her eyes filled with all the compliments she could muster, she spoke in a quavering voice. “Your dear Momo...has never been so grateful to the Lord for the gift of life as she is right noooow...! I give thanks for the blessing of this daaay!”

“That might be the first time I’ve ever seen you sincerely pray to the Lord...”

“The Lord is only a convenient creation by man as far as I’m concerned, so that was just a figure of speech to express that you’re simply divine, darliiing!”

It was no coincidence that Momo had the lowest faith scores in the history of their monastery. The way she said it so nonchalantly made one question if she was really a member of the clergy at all. The saddest part was that this was Momo’s MO.

“By the way, do you have any information of note for me? I hate to admit it, but as I’ve been traveling with Akari, it’s been difficult to collect much news.”

“Information, hmm? Let me see...”

Momo tapped her chin in a cute yet calculated motion, searching her memories.

“From the eastern front, I’ve heard that the Director escaped from prison in Grisarika Kingdom, and there have been defectors from the Faust on the defense lines of the eastern Wild Frontier, and so ooon. Not much news from the west, thooough.”

“Er... That seems like rather big news.”

“Well, it doesn’t directly affect either of us, sooo...”

“I suppose not, but...”

Any one of those matters could seriously change the state of the world.

It was true enough that they’d already passed through the east. It was a relief to hear that there wasn’t any violent activity going on in the western part of the continent, where they were headed next.

“By the way, about why you chose this place for our meeting...”

Certainly, they could avoid being noticed on a private beach. But someone

powerful enough to have such a space was unlikely to offer it as a hiding place to some regular knights.

It was at this precise moment that the exact person Menou was expecting chose to emerge from the pension.

“Hey there, ‘darling.’ It’s been a while.”

The high-class young woman greeted Menou in the casual tone of someone seeing an old friend, her red-tinted blond hair trailing behind her. As if her usual clothing wasn’t skimpy enough, her swimsuit was boldly risqué. The unique and peculiar design was radically revealing; clearly, she was a step or two ahead of her time.

It was, indeed, Ashuna Grisarika in the flesh.

“Swimsuits are splendid, aren’t they? Clothes meant to show off the natural beauty of the human body beneath the sun—they’re magnificent in my eyes. And it’s all the more refreshing at the water’s edge! In fact, I wish I could strut around town in this outfit!”

“Are you insane?”

She seemed 30 percent more cheerful than usual, perhaps because her swimsuit was 30 percent more revealing than her usual getup. There was nothing relatable about her excitement to anyone else present, however. Momo, especially, sullenly sealed her lips and refused to meet Ashuna’s eyes.

“So what do you think? Nice place, isn’t it? No one but the royal family of Grisarika Kingdom has possession of a private beach here in the Balar Oasis.”

“...Is that right? I must say, you have an impressive lineage, Your Highness.”

“I won’t deny it. Besides, I heard, you know. You beat up some delinquents as soon as you arrived in town, didn’t you? I would expect no less of someone I appraised highly.”

“Thanks, I suppose...,” Menou responded blandly.

Akari started swimming back toward shore, probably because she’d noticed an unfamiliar face.

Menou glanced at her aide. “Momo. Thank you for everything so far. If we

have to fight those ruffians in the desert, could I ask you to support Akari from the shadows?”

“I couldn’t possibly care less what happens to that boob-lady, but I’d do anything for you, darliing. Very well.”

“Thank you. I feel better knowing I can count on you, Momo.”

Just as Momo turned to withdraw into the pension before Akari arrived, Menou snatched up the scripture that the pink-haired girl had been hiding under her drink tray, continuously invoking a conjuring with shocking stealth.

“Ah!” Momo was caught completely off guard. Before she could react, Menou flipped the stolen scripture open.

She turned straight to the first verse of the first chapter.

The scripture carried by priestesses was a highly advanced conjuring medium, a vessel that could invoke countless kinds of conjurings. The page Menou chose was capable of recording images and video.

It had a standing image of a miniature Menou in her swimsuit.

This was one of the few shortcomings of Menou’s talented assistant, and it was quite a flaw. *I knew it*, she thought, narrowing her eyes and sending Guiding Force into Momo’s scripture.

“What?! Darling, please wait!” Momo cried out, but Menou ignored her. She wouldn’t tolerate recordings of herself, especially taken without permission.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:1—Invoke [Transcribe the miracle before my eyes, for it must be recorded.]

After erasing the contents of the recording conjuring, an exclusive tool of the Faust, she returned the scripture to Momo. “Here, you can have this back.”

“M-my collection... My precious picture collectiooon of my darling...! That’s practically the only reason I carry this stupid book...!”

Menou dearly hoped that was an exaggeration.

It was better for Momo’s sake if she lost the fruits of her bad habit. Menou had waited for a long time to get a chance to erase them, and now Momo had

finally let her guard down. Surely, now Momo would learn some more useful scripture conjurings. Her spirits rising, Menou cheerfully shooed away Momo, who was in tears.

“Yes, yes, I know. Hurry up and hide... Oh, right. Momo, do you remember Sahara?”

“Sahara? Oh, that piece of garbaaage...”

Momo was quick to trash-talk the girl from their monastery, not knowing that she and Menou had recently been reunited.

“I figured she must be long dead by now. Is she still aliiive? If she ever shows her face in front of either of us again, I intend to crush her stupid hands and seal her mouth shuuut.”

“Wh-who knows? I wonder where she might be right now!”

Well, that's not going to work, Menou thought, giving up immediately as she watched Momo go into the pension.

Behind her, Akari walked up and was greeted by Ashuna.

“Looks like we’ve got a newcomer, so let me reintroduce myself. I’m Ashuna Grisarika. So can I ask what your name is, since you’re a friend of darling here?”

“I-I’m Akari. I’m a perfectly normal person who travels along with Menou.”

This rather strange self-introduction was the result of Menou warning Akari to be careful not to reveal herself as a lost one. She was developing a bad habit of being so paranoid that she ended up sounding even more suspicious.

Akari looked back and forth between Menou and Ashuna, then whispered to Menou.

“Why in the world is she calling you darling? Is this some weird priestess thing?”

“Does she look like a priestess to you? Pure, proper, and powerful?”

“She does kinda seem strong, but not very priestess-like, I guess. It doesn’t sound very romantic when she says it, either. She just seems, uh, strong. Yeah.”

“Exactly. I assure you it’s nothing of the sort. I would never want a darling like

that.”

As they whispered back and forth, Ashuna appeared between them.

“Hrm. I must say, you’re not being very nice.”

“Eek?!” Akari jumped, alarmed at her sudden closeness. She took several steps back, possibly intimidated by Ashuna. Akari could be surprisingly shy sometimes. Along with Ashuna’s bold expression and appearance, she was remarkably tall for a woman, which made her presence all the more overwhelming.

Menou nonchalantly stepped in front of Akari as she addressed Ashuna with narrowed eyes.

“Just to confirm, what exactly are you doing here, Your Highness?”

“Hmm? I just happened to run into those knights as I was walking through the desert to cut across the central Wild Frontier. I ended up helping them with their investigation, then they begged me to become their leader. I had no reason to refuse, so here we are.”

The princess was so charismatic that she found herself leading people no matter where she went. Menou didn’t know whether to be impressed or just exhausted.

“I ran into Momo after that. When she heard about our private beach, she got all excited for some reason and asked me to help you all out.”

It seemed that Momo was involved in the choice of this meeting place, too.

Ashuna’s arrival lessened Menou’s motivation considerably.

Can’t we just let her take care of it without me getting involved? If we wait a few days, we might just find out she brought down that Iron Chain group herself... Menou was starting to get overoptimistic until Ashuna clapped a hand over her shoulder with a friendly smile.

“You seem to have some information of your own already, but we’re after a certain group of wanted criminals. And I do believe you owe me a favor. So if our goals are the same, why not join forces?”

“.....” Menou’s expression soured.

She knew exactly what Ashuna was referring to: their collaboration in Libelle. Ashuna had made major contributions to the fight against Pandæmonium, who was on a wild rampage with sacrifices. Without her help, the damage likely would have been far worse, and Menou might not have even made it out unharmed.

Most of all, Ashuna hadn't pried into Menou's identity at all. She didn't even ask her name. It was proof that she respected Menou's position. Of course, Menou could just pretend not to remember, but with Ashuna, it was better to be straightforward.

"Very well, Your Highness. I have an inkling of where those criminals might be, so I'll share what I know."

"Perfect."

Based on information Menou got from Sahara, Ashuna was probably looking for Miller and Wolff.

"These criminals are likely part of a human trafficking organization. And after infiltrating them the other day, I can confirm that their base is probably..."

Resigning herself, Menou spilled all her information about the Iron Chain group in the desert.

"Whew..." Menou quietly shut the door behind her.

She had finished her meeting with Ashuna and returned to the inn. In addition to discussing the current situation, she'd also learned that Manon was still alive after their encounter in Libelle. There was a lot to think about, but she had something else to take care of first.

"Have a seat, Menou." Perched on the bed, Akari patted the spot next to her. Her lips were downturned in a pout, and there was a crease between her eyebrows. Everything about her expression and mannerisms indicated *I'm mad at you right now*.

Worn out from the conversation with Ashuna, Menou obediently sat down.

"I can overlook the situation with Sahara, okay? It was a long time ago, so that's normal."

“Mm-hmm.”

What is she on about now? Menou wondered, half-listening.

“But more importantly! That Ms. Ashuna person we met on the beach. What’s your relationship with that gorgeous lady?!”

“What relationship...?”

Her wording was ridiculous, but when Menou seriously considered the question, she found it was surprisingly difficult to answer.

What *was* the relationship between Ashuna and Menou? They weren’t friends, nor were they colleagues. Indeed, Ashuna was a royal of the Noblesse, and Menou was an Executioner of the Faust. They came from entirely different worlds. And this was only their second time meeting.

“A casual relationship, I suppose?”

“I don’t approve of that kind of thing at all!”

For some reason, Akari managed to misinterpret Menou’s response, her temper only worsening.

“You could really stand to treat me better, Menou! It’s just like Sahara said. You have to get over this habit of seducing women wherever you go! How is my heart supposed to rest?!”

“You’re not making my heart rest, either.”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow!”

Menou grabbed Akari’s face and mercilessly subjected her to an iron claw hold. Once Akari quieted down, she tossed her onto the bed and headed over to the desk.

“What nooow? Are you keeping a diary, Menou?”

“Don’t be absurd,” Menou dismissed as the black-haired girl rolled around on the bed.

She was using the paper to sketch out the positions of the buildings in the base they’d infiltrated the day before, excluding the clearly slapped-together one-story buildings and barracks.

The buildings that remained formed a strange pattern indeed.

There were four towers, one in each cardinal direction, positioned on the perfectly circular wall. Aside from that, the other buildings formed two pentagrams if connected with lines. It was on a level surface instead of the traditional dome-shaped ceremonial hall, but even so, there was no mistake.

“An architectural conjuring circle...,” Menou murmured, quietly enough that Akari wouldn’t hear her.

From what she could tell, it was a ceremonial conjuring circle to connect a different world to this one. The setup of the base was a perfect match for a conjuring circle—but there was no astral vein here. And Menou doubted they could get enough Guiding Force to invoke such a conjuring, so she wrote down a hypothesis in the corner of the paper.

Planned to use Akari’s Guiding Force?

That was her first thought, but she quickly crossed it out.

Using an Otherworlder to summon an Otherworlder was simply too nonsensical. Besides, if they tried to draw out that much power from her, Akari’s Pure Concept would almost certainly fly out of control and cause major damage.

“Which means they must have some other goal...”

How did they intend to use this conjuring circle?

The Mechanical Society in the eastern Wild Frontier. That was undoubtedly the key to the mystery, but Menou couldn’t figure out how they were connected. There wasn’t enough time to investigate the enemy’s goal, either. In her meeting with Ashuna, they had concluded that they would attack at once.

“...Well, hopefully we’ll destroy it and none of that will matter.”

Thus, their first night in the oasis supply stop came to a close.

“Damn.” Wolff, the leader of the human trafficking organization Iron Chain, cursed when he heard his subordinate’s report. “Flarette is that good, huh? And if she’s teaming up with the Princess Knight, we can’t touch ’em. Let’s get outta here.”

His decision was swift when Miller told him the outcome of the battle.

It was unfortunate to have to abandon this place after so much preparation, but sacrifices had to be made. They would have to dispose of the architectural conjuring circle they'd built on their base, taking the money they'd saved up and making a break for it.

Abducting Flarette and her Otherworlder companion wasn't a necessity to begin with. They'd just heard information about the pair's presence from a certain source and made a pass at capturing them, nothing more.

"We're running away? This is a hell of a chance to give up."

"That information is from a newbie anyway. No reason to risk our hides actin' on it."

Flarette, who was pretending to be a priestess on a pilgrimage, and Ashuna Grisarika, the Princess Knight of the Grisarika Kingdom. If they tried to lay a hand on that duo, they'd come away with more than just a light burn.

"Hate to lose the Otherworlder, but yeah. Makes no sense to fight Flarette head-on when you couldn't even kill her with a surprise attack. If they figure out what this ceremony is for, we'll be screwed."

They might've been able to take on one or two ordinary priestesses. Even if such priestesses teamed up with some knights to attack the base, he was confident that his guys could use their home field advantage to turn the tables on them. After all, Wolff's criminal group was armed far better than any ordinary group of thieves. They had Genom's support, and with it, the ample conjuring weapons he provided. Wolff and his men were definitely a step ahead of most, but he wasn't overconfident enough to think they could beat Flarette.

Wolff's generation was from Flare's golden age. He was well aware of what Executioners were really capable of.

"If she's the successor to that woman, she wouldn't fight us fair and square anyway. Attacking her first was one thing, but I don't wanna be on the receiving end of that."

Wolff had big ambitions; that was why he was able to climb to the top in the first place. When his organization started working under Genom Cthulha, they

were able to get high-quality conjuring weapons. The last thing he wanted to do was put his life on the line in a no-win scenario just when things were going so well.

“This ain’t gonna be our only chance. Now start preparing to take things down and move out.”

“But we could also bury her here and now. This is a perfect opportunity.”

“You’re bein’ real pushy, Miller.” Wolff looked suspiciously at his right-hand man, who wasn’t normally this persistent. “Settle down, will ya? I thought you were a cleverer guy than all that. You’ve been acting real weird since you got back from the eastern Wild Frontier.”

It was a shame to leave their base, but they could abandon the lowest-ranking members to buy time for their escape. Iron Chain was disbanding. They would scatter for the time being, hide out in the desert, and plan their comeback.

“I’ll gather the guys who we’re getting out of here. You’re in charge of collecting the goods and—”

Miller was the vice-captain of this base. He’d be among the members who escaped.

Wolff was decisive but sometimes too passionate, so it was only thanks to Miller’s support that he’d made it this far.

A dry *bang* echoed through the air.

It was the sound of a Guiding gun. A red stain spread across Wolff’s clothes from within.

“Damn you...” Wolff stared at Miller in disbelief. When he saw his right-hand man’s inhuman expression, he instinctively understood.

Miller’s face and body were undoubtedly his own. This was the man who’d been his close subordinate for many years. This man’s loyalty didn’t lie with Wolff anymore, however. He didn’t even care what happened to Iron Chain.

Miller didn’t even bat an eye at Wolff’s words.

“Sorry, Wolff. I’ve got to activate this conjuring circle no matter what. You get it, right? I received power straight from the man himself. It’s my duty to pay him

back for that. Worst case, it doesn't even matter if we win or lose. Either way, it'll help set him free in the end."

"You're...joking...!"

"I'm not." Miller pulled out a dagger that was hidden in the room. It looked very similar to the one he'd seen Flarette carrying earlier that day.

Then he stabbed it into Wolff at the perfect angle to hide the gunshot wound.

"This is just the rational thing to do."

Wolff breathed his last just as Miller finished speaking. Looking down at the corpse, Miller sighed.

"...So killing him didn't raise my level, huh?" he muttered. "Well, let's hope the experience points from Flarette will be worth the effort."

As he talked to himself, he struck the window, breaking it from the inside.

"Captain Wolff! What was that—?"

One of their men came running in, alerted by the sound of the Guiding gun followed by the shattering glass. He trailed off when he saw the situation inside.

"What in the world...?"

"It's Flarette. I don't know if she was getting revenge for our attack this afternoon or if she heard that Wolff and I are wanted men, but she killed him—damn it all."

Miller's voice quaked with fury. He was normally so calm as to seem cold-blooded, so hearing his voice tremble was a shock to his subordinate.

"She'll probably be back in the next few days—to kill me. But if she thinks she'll get away with murdering our leader, she's got another thing coming." He kept his voice cool yet menacing. "Get ready to take her on when she comes back. We'll use their corpses to activate this ceremonial conjuring circle."

That's why I killed Wolff, after all.

Keeping this last part to himself, Miller began giving the orders for their counterattack against Flarette and her allies.



Menou once received a present from her Master.

It was when she became the youngest trainee ever to be promoted from the black garb of a nun to the white of an assistant priestess.

When Menou put on the white priestess robe, her Master gave her a yellow cape.

She could wear it over her robes, and it wouldn't get in the way of intense movements. She said it was to commemorate Menou's first step toward becoming an official Executioner.

"I just picked the first thing I saw. You can pawn it off on someone else if you want."

"What are you talking about? I would never."

I would never do anything so insensitive like giving away a present, Menou thought. *How impolite does she think I am?* As the young girl sulked, her Master looked at her and grinned. Then she tapped her head lightly in two places—indicating the positions of the ribbons Menou's junior Momo always wore.

"What about Momo's ribbons, hmm? Do you remember who first gave those to whom?"

"Ahhh..." Menou quickly averted her eyes.

The red ribbons that Menou had given to Momo when they were younger were actually first given to her by her Master.

"It's important to be stylish."

"Stylish. I see."

After that nostalgic exchange, Menou learned how to take care of her appearance, and she received ribbons as a prop. She later used those two red ribbons from her Master to tie Momo's hair in pigtails. Of course, that was to

stop Momo from crying, but those were Menou's only possessions at the time.

It was hard to defend herself when her Master pointed it out now, though.

"Don't worry. I pick out presents myself now, so I won't give away something that's been given to me."

"That's true. You could even financially support me now."

"Please don't joke about that. Ah! Please stop pulling!"

Her Master yanked roughly on the black scarf ribbon, a gift from Momo, which held Menou's chestnut hair. She guffawed at Menou's protest.

Then she gave Menou one last warning as she prepared to leave the monastery.

"From now on, you will be traveling the world to dispose of taboos. An Executioner does not belong to any parish. They rarely return to the holy land and almost always act on their own. Don't trust anyone, not even others in the same position as you. Since we don't depend on any system, people will betray you all the more."

"Have you ever been betrayed by someone, Master?"

"Have I? Let's see..." Her Master closed her eyes as if recalling the past.

Her expression when she tried to remember something was uncharacteristically vulnerable.

"I don't think anyone's ever...*failed* to betray me."

When her teacher gave this response after a long pause, Menou couldn't help staring at her intently.

"...What's that look for?"

"Sorry, it's just..." Menou was honestly surprised.

If her Master had been betrayed, that meant she had to trust someone. If someone she didn't care about had rebelled against her, she would probably just say *I dealt with them permanently*.

So it was all the more unexpected that such an independent person would say she was ever betrayed.

“I just wasn’t expecting to hear that you trust people sometimes, Master.”

“What exactly do you think I am?”

“...An Executioner in the form of a person, I guess.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Menou thought her choice of phrasing was perfectly apt, but her Master sounded bemused by Menou’s appraisal.

“I’m human, you know, not something else in the form of a person. I’m not perfect, not invincible—just a human being. I’ve lost in battle more than once, and I’ve failed missions before, too.”

“You *lost*?”

This was completely unexpected, too. Menou gaped, looking foolish.

Her Master snorted, amused by the reaction. “Yeah, that’s right. To monsters like the archbishop; Experion, the world’s strongest knight, from Grisarika Kingdom; the beast of the Commons, Genom Cthulha, who traversed the eastern Wild Frontier...and plenty of others, too. It’s a small world, but a big one at the same time.”

That was certainly an impressive lineup. Why had she tried to fight all these opponents anyway? Menou found herself shuddering at the idea of facing down such battles, which would be far tougher than Otherworlders in many ways.

“You may well find yourself fighting enemies like that someday, too.”

“No, I won’t.”

“What, too afraid for your life?” Her Master snickered.

“...That’s not what I mean.” Menou puffed her cheeks sullenly.

It was a mean-spirited question. She wasn’t trying to say that she was afraid to challenge such foes—just that she doubted she would have reason to throw herself into such legendary battles like her Master clearly had in the past.

“You never really know what your future might hold, kid. I’ve got no idea what lies in store for you, either, but that’s why I’m warning you now.”

Suddenly, her Master put her right hand on Menou's head. She wasn't patting her hair or measuring her height—just resting her hand there, almost as if to hold down Menou's growth.

Menou was turning twelve that year.

Even now that she had grown taller, kept her hair tidily arranged, and wore a white priestess robe, Menou was still more than small enough for her Master to rest her palm on her head.

“No matter how much you believe in someone, they're bound to betray you.”

Her tone was too casual to be a prediction, too light to be a curse.

“That's what it takes to turn out like me.”

She was simply describing the future that Menou would someday experience.

 The Traitorous Heart

This was during the first time around.

She spent too long worrying about getting ready, and they ended up missing their train.

“Ack.”

They watched as the end of the train sped away. Her shoulders sagged, knowing it was her fault that they missed the train even though they’d arranged for tickets.

“I-I’m sorry...”

“Oh, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

As they watched the trail of Guiding Light fade from the tracks, the other girl shrugged, cheerfully letting her failure slide. Akari hung her head in response.

There were no more trains heading toward their destination until the following morning. So on this day when they were summoned, they got a hotel room in the capital of Grisarika Kingdom.

Wracked by guilt, Akari trailed after the other girl, who kept trying to talk to her and cheer her up, but Akari only managed to mumble vaguely and wear a forced smile.

That was the first step of their first journey together.

At the time, Akari had no way of knowing the one-day delay allowed them to avoid a major incident.

She just hoped that she could make it up to her in the future.

As she sprawled out on the bed and sneaked a glance at the girl next to her... she wished she could thank that girl properly for looking after her.

That was the kind of person she wanted to be.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Regression: Memories, Soul, Spirit]

It was the morning of their second day in the oasis.

As the sunlight poured into their room at the inn, Akari shook her head to break out of her daze.

Menou wasn't there. She and Sahara had left early in the morning, saying they had priestess duties to attend to. She insisted that it was too dangerous, managing to convince Akari to stay behind.

Now, left alone in their rented room, Akari yawned in a very unladylike manner.

"Something's definitely off...," she mumbled.

Akari Tokitou was a time traveler.

As the holder of the Pure Concept of *Time*, she had the ability to *Regress* time for the entire world. By using this ability that she'd acquired when summoned to this world, Akari had already repeated her journey with Menou over and over.

So that Menou could kill her.

Akari was rewinding time to search for a way that Menou could survive, but she always failed.

Usually, Akari kept her memories locked away so she wouldn't arouse suspicion, but there were certain conditions that allowed her to unlock them, which let her check on the current situation and occasionally guide Menou's actions.

It was precisely because she had the advantage of knowing the future that Akari could say exactly what felt wrong about this situation now.

"Nothing like this has ever happened before..."

The events here in the desert, the Wild Frontier in the center of the continent, were completely different from how Akari remembered them.

Akari had never been kidnapped by criminals here before. Usually, their

travels across the desert went fairly smoothly. This time, things had gotten out of hand so quickly that Menou and Akari were now separated.

Most of all, Akari didn't have any memories of the girl called Sahara. They had never met before.

"I don't dislike Sahara, but..."

A chance meeting with an unfamiliar girl made her think of the monstrous encounter they had in Libelle, too...with Manon Libelle.

A girl whose mother was an Otherworlder had spiraled into taking violent actions, fueled by her feeling of displacement in this world. She'd caused a massive tragedy that involved countless innocents without any hesitation.

The one who tempted her into sin was none other than the terrifying Pure Concept of *Evil*—a gruesome specter that wore the guise of a little girl and took it off at will, donning her own cast-off skin to hide the monster inside.

"I wonder if she has something to do with this..."

The source of all Concepts of Original Sin, one of the Four Major Human Errors.

Akari shuddered as she pictured the cherubic little girl. She embodied the repulsive yet pitiable end that awaited an Otherworlder.

Something the girl had said echoed in the back of Akari's mind.

"It exists. A way home."

While Akari kept turning back time and clinging to this world, the girl had given her an innocent grin and told her that she could, in fact, go back home. Akari shook off the memory that tried to lodge itself in her mind.

"I'm never going back."

It didn't matter if she used up all her memories and forgot about Japan entirely.

When she'd seen the vase of flowers placed on a desk that nobody sat at anymore, she remembered thinking, *What a tasteless joke*. It made her unreasonably angry.

That student had suddenly stopped coming to class one day. Who was it that used to sit there?

Akari had already forgotten. It might have even been a friend of hers. In fact, it almost certainly was. Otherwise, there was no reason she would have gotten so annoyed when she saw the vase.

But what kind of person was her friend who sat there?

That had already been consumed by *Time*.

"I'm awful, aren't I?" she murmured to herself as she reflected on the lost memory.

It seemed cruel even to her that she didn't care whether she forgot about that person.

"But I've got Menou."

And she didn't need anything else.

Now that she'd confirmed that, Akari turned her thoughts back to the current situation.

Whether Pandæmonium was directly involved in this or not, the fact that she'd escaped from the fog meant that the flow of time had fundamentally changed from any existing timeline.

The fractures formed in this world by Akari's frequent use of *Regression* had warped the fog enough to unleash Pandæmonium. In other words, her own efforts to save Menou were unwinding the future Akari knew.

Be that as it may, she just had deal with these situations as they arose. Akari's only goal was to be killed by Menou; as long as that happened, it didn't matter how they got there.

"If they're going to that base from yesterday, I can catch up to them if I want to."

Akari could teleport. There were some restrictions, but for the most part, she could instantly transfer people or objects. If Menou was in danger, Akari could find an excuse to come running to her side. She could even pretend to have gotten kidnapped again if it came to that.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Yeees?”

Akari opened the door without really checking, assuming it was an employee here to make the bed. It was habits like these that made Menou scold her for being thoughtless, but Akari didn’t think she was. Both sides of her were the real Akari, be it her regular self or the one who had memories of all the previous time loops. Her base personality was the same. When her memories were unlocked, her mind was able to integrate smoothly.

She opened the door to find a girl.

“Hello. Am I right in assuming you’re Ms. Akari Tokitou?”

“Er...”

A decidedly adorable young woman nodded in greeting to Akari, who stood dumbfounded at the door, her bed head sticking up wildly without her headband. The Japanese girl had to direct her gaze downward slightly to make eye contact with her. Akari wasn’t particularly tall herself, but her visitor was even shorter.

“Um, yeah, I’m Akari...”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Akari. I’ve been put in charge of guarding you while my darling is away.”

A guard. Akari’s eyes glittered. She had never expected this girl to suddenly appear before her now.

This had never happened before, either.

“I’m a junior to Menou, the priestess who has been guiding you all this time.”

“Menou’s junior...”

Akari knew that, of course.

On closer inspection, her visitor’s clothing was of the same variety that Menou was always wearing. The skirt’s hem was daringly short and modified with adorable frills, but it was still a priestess robe.

“Is that a white priestess robe?”

Akari was so blindsided by this new development that she found herself voicing a pointless question.

“Yes. Unlike my darling, I am still in training. I’m a mere novice priestess who serves as an assistant.”

The girl in the robes seemed perfectly unruffled; she placed a white-gloved hand on her chest and shifted her tights-clad legs together neatly.

“My name is Momo. I hope we’ll get along.”

Her pink pigtails bounced as Momo smiled brightly.

“When you’re forming multiple relationships, I think it’s important to consider the relationships between those other people, too.”

The morning sun hadn’t yet started to shine at full strength. As they strode briskly through the fine sand of the desert, Sahara began explaining an inexplicable theory to Menou.

“You can’t give any one person special treatment. No, I guess that’s not quite right. You have to make *everyone* think they’re special. It’s important to keep giving bait to a fish you’ve already hooked. Basically, you have to be considerate.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just sharing a helpful tip.”

Menou’s cold remark seemed out of place against the warm, dry air, but Sahara looked at her like it was obvious.

“Well, none of this is helpful to me in the least. Would you mind changing the subject?”

“Are you sure about that...? When you’ve got a berserk, violent monster like Momo at your side, I think it’s important to know this stuff. She’s definitely going to start taking action herself if you leave her to her own devices for too long.”

“Listen. She can certainly be a little too emotional at times, but Momo is an excellent aide and a very nice girl.”



“I don’t think anyone else would ever say that about her.”

Menou and Sahara had been walking through the desert all morning.

They’d left the oasis at dawn, and it was now past noon. Menou was wearing a hooded robe over her priestess outfit to block the sun and a cloth around her neck and mouth to fend off the sand. Sahara was decked out in a similar combination, though she had on a nun’s outfit instead of a priestess’s.

Ashuna and her knights were traveling separately. They would attack from the front, while Menou and Sahara would infiltrate the base from the rear. The plan was to arrive near the Iron Chain base before sunset and attack once night fell. Because Akari had been kidnapped, they knew the location of the enemy base. Since Menou had already sneaked in once, she had a good grasp of the inner setup as well.

“Sahara, is that right arm of yours all right? You said that the *Vessel* is attached to it...”

“I’m fine. It isn’t eroding my spirit at all, and I can use it freely, too.”

They were chatting to kill time during their journey. As they were catching up on each other’s lives, Menou sensed a faint Guiding Force reaction.

There was something hidden in the sand. Judging by the residue, it wasn’t a living thing. A conjured soldier, maybe. And it was the kind used for spying, too. Oddly enough, it had a communication conjuring built in, giving it the ability to send information over long distances. Conjured soldiers were designated taboo objects, and they couldn’t be produced with current conjuring technology, either. This must be more contraband sent by Genom Cthulha from the eastern Wild Frontier.

“What’s wrong?” Sahara gave Menou a puzzled look when she suddenly fell silent.

“Nothing. I just got a little sand in my eye. I’m gonna get it out.”

“I see... Are you sure? It might be better not to touch it.”

Catching on to the hidden meaning, Sahara responded in kind.

The conjured soldier would obviously alert its owner if it was found, but it

would also transmit its location if it was destroyed. The best approach would be to stay hidden from it entirely, but if it found them, they would lose the element of surprise. While it would be less disastrous if Ashuna and her knights were discovered since they were attacking head-on, it was crucial that Menou and Sahara's actions stayed secret.

"Don't worry. We can do something about it."

"All right." Sahara jumped forward. The phosphorous light of Guiding Enhancement surrounded her. She moved swiftly toward the enemy without being slowed by the sand. Her artificial right arm shone brilliantly with Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjunction—Activate [Skill: Guiding Cannon]

The Guiding Light shot forth from her arm, sending sand flying everywhere.

A snake-shaped conjured soldier burst into view. It was around the length of a human arm, squirming in the sand.

Menou was more focused on Sahara's skill than the soldier it had dragged out. It was very strange—not just a simple crest conjuring. Her prosthetic arm was definitely the invocation medium, but even Menou couldn't figure out what components it used. As far as she could see, the arm didn't seem to have lost any material.

Menou moved even as she analyzed Sahara's conjuring.

Grabbing the conjured soldier in midair, she filled it with Guiding Force before it could contact the base.

Guiding Force: Connect—Primary Green Stone, Far-Speech Snake—Infiltrate Exterior—Alter Conjunction—

The Guiding Force within the snake rose up to resist. All she was doing was altering the contents of the transmission the snake was trying to send. This required a delicate touch, not brute force.

Command [Nothing to report.]

The order went through.

“There. Now it won’t be a problem.”

“Wow. You’ve still got it.”

Menou tossed the conjured soldier aside. It burrowed back into the sand and resumed its fixed surveillance.

She had succeeded in rewriting the report. Now their location wouldn’t be discovered. Menou and Sahara resumed their journey.

Momo walked around Balar Oasis with Akari in tow.

They checked out the stalls on the relatively safe main road that circled the area and toured the ruins that remained. Since they were young women traveling alone, they were making every effort to look like ordinary sightseers.

But the pair were walking a bit farther apart than necessary.

“I was told that you enjoy sightseeing. Was this tour not to your liking?” Momo asked politely.

“I do like sightseeing, but...” Akari trailed off.

By all appearances, Momo was smiling cheerfully in response to Akari’s half-hearted answer, but on the inside, she was irritated to the max.

She had made direct contact with Akari on her own—without getting Menou’s permission—for a very specific purpose. But even after several hours together, she hadn’t managed to get any closer to Akari.

From the way she interacted with Menou, Momo had assumed that Akari was quick to lower her guard with other people, but she was unexpectedly distant.

“I’m just kinda wondering why you’re here, Momo...? I thought Menou was supposed to guard me.”

“In normal circumstances. But it’s difficult even for her to supervise you at all times, you see. There will be occasions where she has to leave your side, so we thought it best that I temporarily take over.”

“Menou didn’t say anything about that to me...”

“Well, it happened very suddenly.”

It made sense that Akari would be mistrustful of Momo when she appeared

out of thin air. But there was no time for this nonsense. Menou would be at the desert base, away from Akari, for less than a day's time. Momo wanted to gain as much of Akari's trust as she could in that span, but her efforts would be for nothing if Menou found out that Momo had made contact with Akari.

"...Ah, I'm sorry. Pardon me for a moment." Momo excused herself as she opened her scripture. She wasn't invoking a conjuring, but she put Guiding Force into the book anyway, making it glow. She was faking a transmission notification. "Ms. Akari. I just received a message from my darling. It's an emergency."

"A message?"

"Yes. We're able to communicate with our scriptures during emergencies. Ah... Th-this can't be...!" The tension in her voice sounded forced. "She's been attacked by the enemy. She'll be hiding out on her own for a while, so she's ordered us to go on ahead to the next town."

"Huh?" Akari looked confused.

"It seems that her mission put a target on your back, too, Ms. Akari. The location of the inn has been discovered. Darling wants us to leave town right away."

"But..."

There was hesitation all over Akari's face. Understandably so. Though Momo had introduced herself as Menou's junior, this was still their first time meeting. It was natural that she'd be reluctant to separate from Menou.

But Momo didn't let her say any of that.

"Let's go back to the inn and gather our things. Then we can wait until the last possible minute, and if I determine that the situation has become too dangerous, we'll escape together. Is that all right?"

She made a quick proposal to take advantage of Akari's confusion. It sounded like a compromise at first blush, but it didn't follow Akari's wishes at all. Everything Momo had just said was a fabrication. In fact, she didn't even have Menou's permission to contact Akari.

This was all part of her plan to get Akari away from Menou. Ever since the incident in Libelle, Momo had been waiting for a chance to separate them.

As much as she hated to admit it, Menou was already interacting with Akari almost entirely as her real self. To be honest, there was very little difference between the Menou Momo knew and the Menou Akari saw. Her act was quickly ceasing to be an act at all.

And now, because of the kidnapping incident, Menou had finally taken her eyes off Akari for an extended period of time.

This was Momo's chance.

If Momo could take Akari across the desert of the central Wild Frontier, it wouldn't be much farther to the Sword of Salt. They could hop on a train to the holy land, obtain permission there, and travel to the salted earth at the western edge of the continent. Momo had no intention of missing this opportunity to potentially spare Menou from unnecessary inner conflict.

Akari's expression housed apprehension, reluctance, and even rejection. No doubt she didn't want to leave this town—or more specifically, Menou's side. At the same time, she theoretically understood that it was for the best.

"M-Momo... If Menou's in trouble, we have to go save her!"

"We mustn't. Darling said she needs to hide. That will be easier if she's on her own. If we try to contact her, we may end up causing problems for her instead."

Akari gulped and fell silent.

It was working. Momo could tell from Akari's reaction. She was going to pull this off, even if she had to deceive her a little. Momo opened her mouth to keep convincing her, but Akari spoke first.

"All right..."

"So you understand?"

"...Uh-huh." Akari pressed her index finger to Momo's forehead.

As Momo gasped in surprise, Akari's finger glowed with Guiding Light.

"I understand that you're being a total pest."

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Suspension]

The Guiding Light flashed.

“This is going smoothly so far.”

“Mm-hmm. At this rate, we should get to the base right on time.”

Menou and Sahara were making their way through the desert all according to plan, having disabled a few more conjured soldiers along the way.

“Are you sure it was all right to leave Akari at the oasis?”

“Of course. She’s got an excellent guard, so she’ll be safe.”

Even if a group of Iron Chain operatives stayed in the oasis and tried to attack Akari while Menou was away, there was nothing to worry about. Momo would protect Akari from the shadows.

Sahara scrunched up her face at Menou’s response. She looked like a child who’d just been presented with a plate full of bitter vegetables.

“...By ‘guard,’ you mean Momo, right?”

“Who else?”

“Well, if you want to trust Momo with that, I guess it’s fine with me.”

From her expression, it was clearly *not* fine with her. Sahara, who’d been blithely teasing Menou nonstop since they were reunited, turned away with a childish huff.

“I don’t know how you can be so calm after leaving Momo in charge of guarding someone. Is she even capable of anything that doesn’t involve destruction?”

“It’ll be fine. She’s very skilled, you know. I can count on my dear assistant for anything.”

“Wow. I’m amazed you can say that with a straight face.”

Clearly, Sahara had a very strong aversion to Momo. While she was attempting to keep a neutral expression, she couldn’t quite hide her irritation. As Menou looked at Sahara’s face in profile, she remembered something.

“Sahara, I know you were always trying to meddle with Momo and getting beaten up because of it, so I can understand why you’d dislike her, but...you *do* realize that was your own doing, don’t you?”

“...It’s all her fault for being a violent monster with the lowest amount of faith in history.”

This seemed to be a bitter memory even for Sahara, who was normally placid.

“Well, it is true that Momo’s faith in the Lord is virtually nonexistent, but... that also means her other grades were exceptional enough that she was able to become an assistant priestess at a young age anyway.”

“Like I care. Besides, it’s a waste not to take any interest in an existence as intriguing as the Lord of the church.”

Clearly reluctant to acknowledge Momo’s abilities, Sahara changed the subject to a rather blasphemous one instead.

“Intriguing...? You ought to speak with more respect.”

“Eh, who cares?” Sahara shrugged and launched into her own theory. “The scriptures—at least, the ones the priestesses of the Faust carry—very clearly describe the Lord as something other than what you’d call a god. Not a savior that rescued humanity from doomsday nor some omnipotent, all-knowing being. The Lord is more like a Concept of some kind that has power and wisdom.”

She tilted her head at Menou, ignoring her warning. “What do you think the Lord actually is anyway?”

“The highest management of the holy land. The decision-making body of the Faust...at least, that’s what I think.”

“So basically, the Elders?”

“Exactly.”

The Elders were a mysterious organization that was only whispered about in rumors, with no official record of their existence.

Churches and parishes existed in every nation under the same general structure. The head of a church was a pastor, the head of a parish was a bishop,

and the head of the nation was the archbishop. There was no official position above archbishop.

Realistically, though, it was highly unlikely that there was no decision-making group in the holy land that managed all these nations. There was only one archbishop per nation, and no post existed above them. Rumors of an administrative body were bound to emerge.

“Well, I think the Lord and the Elders are two different things.”

“Oh?” Menou asked.

“And I think we’re more hopeless against them than we realize.”

Her words reminded Menou of something her Master once said.

“Anyway. I just think you should be a little more aware of how dangerous Momo can be.” Sahara kept her voice short but sharp-edged. “Knowing how savage she is, she might even attack Akari.”

Baseless slander. Now she’s just being rude, Menou thought, shrugging dismissively.

The light from Akari’s finger cut through the sky.

“Wha—?”

A confused voice reached Momo’s ears. Akari was frowning in disappointment as she watched Momo continue to move in her own time.

“I missed.”

“...What were you trying to do?”

Momo’s voice was sharp, face stiffening. This was an unexpected development. Akari attacking her was definitely not part of the plan.

Akari smiled. It was a very different expression from the innocent, oblivious look she usually wore.

“I should be asking you that. Right, Momo? You came to try to separate me from Menou, didn’t you? And without even getting Menou’s permission, too.”

“...And so what if I did?”

There was no point trying to lie now. Akari clearly saw Momo as an enemy.

Her eyes fixed on Momo, Akari's smile widened. "I thought so. Which means..."

She took aim at Momo with her index finger; her thumb was raised, her other fingers clenched, forming the shape of a gun.

"If I get rid of you now, Menou will have no reason to suspect me."

Her voice was cold enough to send chills down anyone's spine; goosebumps crept over Momo's skin. Being spoken to with such a familiar attitude by someone she'd never met before was deeply disturbing.

Akari smiled at her almost evilly, but Momo smirked fiercely in return.

"I see..."

There was only one theory that could explain Akari's sudden change in attitude.

"So you have memories from before using *Regression*."

Regression. Menou had told Momo about her theory that Akari might be creating a time loop.

"I'm amazed you were able to deceive us for so long, boob-lady."

"Would you mind not giving me such a rude nickname? There's nothing worse than making fun of people for their physical traits, if you ask me."

"Oh? Do you have some bad memories associated with that? Oh, right, I'm sorryyy. When you use a nasty taboo entity, you lose your memories, don't yooou? No wonder you have such a brainless personality, hmm?"

Momo's sarcastic drawl only intensified the evil glint in Akari's eyes. The two girls glared at each other, eyes shooting daggers.

"But you haven't been putting on an act this whole time, either, have you? I doubt you would've been able to fool my darling so thoroughly if that were the case. Your attitude changed so suddenly... Do you seal your memories with *Regression* and keep them hidden away?"

Akari Tokitou was traveling back in time. That was the conclusion Menou and

Momo had reached when they pooled their information. They'd assumed Akari's memories reverted to the moment she was summoned when she turned back time, but evidently, they were mistaken about that part.

When she was with Menou, she normally kept her memories *Regressed* to a point where she had no knowledge of the future—but why would she do something like that?

It was easy enough to guess.

If there was a Pure Concept user who knew the future and could turn back time, Menou certainly wouldn't be traveling with her. Working together with someone who knew the future would mean they would know what would happen next, which was all well and good if it was someone you could trust. But a stranger with such an ability was not to be trusted. Menou would be suspicious.

So Akari erased her own memories to keep Menou from suspecting anything.

“And what's your goal in clinging to my darling, vixen?”

“This is why I hate it when people find out I have my memories... You believe that part, but I can never get you to trust me about anything else.”

“Mind explaining that in a way that makes sense?”

As Momo stared piercingly at her, Akari scowled and stuck out her tongue.

“No way! You wouldn't believe me anyway, so nope!”

It was an outright refusal to try to reach an understanding. All expression dropped from Momo's face, and she looked at Akari flatly.



She had never liked her to begin with. Nothing was more important to Momo than Menou, and she prioritized Menou's safety above all else, even if it meant the death of some stranger or even the destruction of half the world. She did have a conscience and common sense, of course, but those would never be more important than Menou.

Naturally, whether Akari lived or died didn't count for anything on that scale, either.

"Well, now I'm more certain than ever." Momo pulled out her coping saw from the frilled hem of her priestess robes and gave it a flick. The wirelike saw snapped sharply in the wind.

"You're not the sort to break down just because of a little rough handling, are you? I'll tie you up, drag you to the Sword of Salt, and kill you with it."

"Why don't you go ahead and try? If you think you can do it, anyway."

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Suspension]

There was no warning—a *Time* conjuring shot out from Akari's fingertip.

The beam of light contained a miraculous trick that could stop the flow of time on a conceptual level. It would end the fight immediately if it hit, but Momo managed to dodge it by a hair. Akari's construction was frighteningly fast. It wasn't skillful so much as purely natural; rather than building it up, it was as if she was releasing a construction that already existed in her soul. Her attacks seemed to skip an invocation step entirely.

Trying to dodge these instant conjurings would only make things more difficult.

So instead, Momo stayed on the offensive, trying to force her opponent into defense mode without giving her a chance to counterattack.

The whiplike saw whistled through the air. Akari wouldn't be able to step out of its range in time. She pointed her index finger at the coping saw and unleashed another conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke

[Weathering]

With a loud *swoosh*, the saw broke down and fell to pieces.

Her attack was incredibly powerful. Momo promptly let go of the dust that remained of her coping saw and analyzed Akari's strikes. The girl had no combat strategy and only a tiny bit more experience than a total novice. That wouldn't be enough to battle the average adventurer, never mind the likes of Menou or Momo.

All she had were her powers.

"...Which are absurdly dangerous," Momo grumbled.

She didn't know how many times the Otherworlder had used *Regression*, but given that she was traveling with Menou as her guard, Momo doubted that Akari had many opportunities to fight on her own. Even if she did, Akari could catch her opponents off guard with her abilities and end the battle before it started, so it was safe to assume she hadn't learned any combat techniques.

Which was why Momo was able to fight her.

If Menou had abilities like Akari's, then Momo probably wouldn't be able to hold her own for longer than ten seconds. The main reason Momo was an even match for Akari was the Japanese girl's lack of combat knowledge.

That, and one other important point: Akari wasn't really trying to kill Momo.

"I always hated you, Momo."

"Is that right? I'd be perfectly happy if you died, myself."

"You don't know anything about Menou, but you go around acting like you understand her better than anyone. It's so annoying."

"Excuse me?" Momo scowled. "And what do *you* know about my darling when you've only just met her, hmm?"

"Her future," Akari replied simply. "Unlike you, I know about her future."

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Acceleration]

Akari sped up drastically.

Her movements were completely amateur, but her speed was far from ordinary. There were no martial arts, muscles, or magic involved. Though she wasn't throwing her body weight around or kicking off the ground to build up momentum, there was insane speed behind her standard steps, making the timing of her strike difficult to calculate.

Most importantly, Momo had to avoid the *Suspension* conjuring at all costs, since it would render her immobile if it hit. At this speed, though, it would be extremely difficult to react in time.

"Tch!" Momo steadied her defensive stance and tried to provoke Akari.

Though the other girl was hostile toward Momo, she didn't seem to want to kill her. Or perhaps the problem was even more fundamental.

Momo smiled.

She guessed Akari had never killed anyone. The girl didn't have the guts to do it, either. She might be able to hurt someone, but she certainly couldn't kill them. That much was obvious from the fact that she kept trying to use *Suspension* on Momo, even though she'd destroyed her weapon with *Weathering*.

Deep down, Akari Tokitou was simply too nice of a person.

"What kind of creep would pretend not to remember anything and cozy up to my darling while secretly plotting stuff? Could you just die before you cause any more trouble for her, please? You have no right to talk about darling's so-called future if you don't know about her past, you little know-it-all."

"...Shut up." Akari froze abruptly.

Clearly, some part of that had touched a nerve; her shoulders were shaking with rage. There was something very eerie about her in this moment.

"Stupid Momo! You can't even protect Menou! It makes no difference whether you're here or not—so I might as well just get rid of you!"

Something inside Akari had snapped.

At first, she thought it was a miracle.

The stone building. The intimidating level of luxury. She stared blankly at the

familiar scene for a moment before she realized...it was the summoning room in Grisarika Kingdom.

She'd gone back to the time when she was first summoned.

The moment she first figured it out, Akari really did believe it was a miracle. But she quickly realized why she had gone back with her memories still intact.

Her Pure Concept was giving her a chance to redo everything.

So Akari waited eagerly for the visitor at her window. She watched for the girl in the lightweight maid outfit to appear along with the silvery light of the moon that emerged just after sunset. And Akari welcomed her appearance with open arms.

"Menou!"

When they were reunited, she eagerly called out the girl's name and greeted her happily.

That was where she went wrong.

"How...do you know my name?"

From that first meeting, Menou was clearly suspicious of her.

Menou didn't trust Akari. She believed that Akari had come from the future but doubted her motives for making contact with her. Menou brought Akari to Orwell—and she had promptly died there.

Her second shot at life ended after the briefest of periods, when she met a terrible end.

On her third attempt, she tried to run away by herself.

She thought it was their first encounter that was where things went wrong. If meeting Akari was what led to Menou's demise, then it was better if they never interacted at all.

But about a month after she went on the run...

"Oh, you're alone."

Akari ran into the red-haired priestess.

It was the same woman who'd put an end to their journey the first time, in the land of salt. She knew she couldn't fight her or run away. If this was how it ended, that was fine—as long as Menou was alive. Or so Akari thought.

“That apprentice of mine died, too. Guess it makes sense that you're by yourself.”

Akari's eyes widened as she realized who the priestess must mean. *“It can't be...”*

“Hmm? Yep, old lady Orwell killed her. My apprentice was going to get taken in with the holder of the Pure Concept of Null and got done in instead. Orwell's a powerful conjurer, you know. If she sets her sights on you, it'd be tough to get out alive.”

As soon as she heard Menou was dead, Guiding Force was drawn out of her soul and rewound the world. It was at the end of that third time that Akari knew—if they weren't together, Menou would die.

Ah...I see.

That was when it occurred to her.

When they met, Menou would be less suspicious of her if Akari didn't know her. If she did, that would put Menou on guard again. In other words, her memories were getting in the way.

Menou had been raised to distrust other people.

If she was suspicious of Akari when they first met, she would ask Orwell for help. After all, she trusted the archbishop more than an Otherworlder, basically a stranger.

And then Menou would die. So why wasn't Menou suspicious of Akari the first time? How was she able to travel for close to three months, when she would die in less than a week if Akari wasn't with her?

It was simple. It was because Akari was so oblivious and easily fooled that there was no reason to be wary of her. It was because she was traveling with this oblivious girl that Menou was more conscious of her surroundings than normal.

It was the ignorant Akari who allowed Menou to live. Then all she had to do was travel with Menou without knowing anything and go to the land of salt, where there was a method that could kill her.

Akari made her hand into the shape of a pistol and held her finger against her temple.

Her memories of their travels together...

If they're going to hurt Menou, then I don't need them.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Regression: Memories, Soul, Spirit]

Akari erased her own memories.

Thus, the journey was able to continue—but they still weren't able to escape the clutches of the priestess with dark-red hair.

"Not even once. You've never once been able to protect Menou."

Memories flashed through her mind. The corners of her eyes grew hot at the thought of all those wasted pasts. Akari lashed out in anger at Momo, who was always with Menou, yet was never able to save Menou's life.

"You can't do anything, so don't talk down to me, Momo!"

"If there's a future where my darling dies because of this mission..." In contrast to Akari's emotional cry, Momo's tone was chillingly calm. "...then that would be your fault."

Akari trembled...because she knew it was true.

The fourth time, the fifth time.

One by one, she learned the factors that caused Menou's death and avoided them, stretching out the length of their journey each time—but there was one obstacle she still couldn't overcome.

The longer their journey went on, the more Menou opened her heart to Akari. Especially that first time. The reason Menou was killed by that red-haired priestess was because she betrayed the Faust and tried to save Akari.

Priestesses-turned-traitors were taboo.

If she didn't travel with Akari, Menou would die—but the longer she did travel with Akari, the more the likelihood of her betraying the Faust increased.

That was why Akari decided to indirectly let on to Menou that she was in a time loop. If she mixed in just a little bit of the truth about herself, then Menou would never give her heart over to Akari completely. That was what she kept telling herself.

But it was also Akari's own selfish desire to keep traveling with Menou.

Momo didn't miss the moment when Akari wavered. She grabbed her by the collar and raised her other hand. Akari squeezed her eyes shut with fear.

Then Momo mercilessly brought down her hand.

A satisfying *smack* rang through the air.

"Um, ow?!"

Momo had slapped Akari's cheek. If she really wanted to, she could have sent the girl's head flying right off, but that wouldn't kill her anyway. Instead, she slapped her other cheek for good measure.

"Yow!! What the heck?!"

"I'm just slapping some sense into you, you big-boobed moron." With that insulting nickname, Momo let go of Akari's collar. "You're not my darling's enemy. That much is clear to me now."

Akari stared in confusion, eliciting an irritated huff from Momo.

"I'll help you out. So tell me everything you know."

"But why...?"

"Listen—just so we're perfectly clear here, I cannot stress this enough: I hate you." She said it with total sincerity, not just to cover her embarrassment. "I don't like seeing you so close to my darling, and I would like nothing more than for a parasite like you to curl up and die instead of cozying up to her. So I'm just offering to make sure that happens as soon as possible."

Akari's eyes kept narrowing as Momo hurled verbal abuse at her.

"...You know, I really do hate you, Momo."

“And as I was just saying, I hate you as well.”

Reaffirming their mutual dislike of each other, the two girls huffed and looked the other way.

“But if it’s for my darling’s sake, then I’ll help you. This is to save her life, isn’t it? Then tell me everything, down to the last detail. I want to hear all about this future you supposedly know. I want to save my darling, too, obviously. I always have—and I always will.”

“...All right.”

Sometimes, mutual hatred can make it easier to talk about things.

And after making all that clear, Momo added: “You are just...so damned stupid! Die already!”

“Don’t call me stupid or tell me to die! Only Menou’s allowed to do that!”

“Oh, give me a break. You should know how stupid you are!”

Amid the avalanche of insults that followed, Momo made a proposal. It was an option that Menou and Akari would never be able to take alone. Akari hesitated but decided to accept it.

And so the two of them formed an alliance to do what had to be done.

As Menou looked ahead, the sun set completely.

The last streaks of red that burned up from the horizon faded one by one. The sky shifted from blue to indigo and finally to the black of twilight, and night fell at last. The sun, the ruler of the day, was gone, and a starry sky and moon emerged in its place.

Menou, who was on standby at the rear of the base, gauged the time by the position of the stars.

“Any minute now.”

“Mm.”

The two of them watched the Guiding Light visible in the base from afar and waited for the signal to infiltrate it. Ashuna was to attack from the front, while Menou and Sahara would break into the heart of the base in the ensuing

confusion.

“What should we do if we don’t get the signal? Just leave?”

“I suppose so, but...I’m sure it will be fine. I can’t even imagine Princess Ashuna failing.”

“Then Momo might be the bigger threat. I’m worried about Akari.”

“I keep telling you, Momo is fine.”

Menou was shushing Sahara when there was a sudden flash.

“Aha,” Menou whispered.

A blazing sword of flames had appeared, cutting through the darkness.

It certainly didn’t look natural, yet it was almost laughably hard to believe that such a phenomenon could be produced by one person. This was Menou’s second time seeing it. As it was Sahara’s first, her eyes went round.

The Princess Knight Ashuna Grisarika had flashed her sword as the signal to start the battle.

A rumble that threatened to demolish the sand dunes roared through the desert.



The Traitorous Arm



Night was wearing on in the desert.

While the air was growing cooler without the light of the sun, it wasn't completely dark. The full moon shone in the sky with nothing to obstruct its glow from faintly illuminating the sand.

Beneath the moonlight that was strong enough to cast a shadow, Ashuna threw off the robe she wore to fend off the sun's heat, revealing an airy outfit underneath. Fabric cut into diamond shapes just barely covered the crucial areas on her upper body, and her notched skirt fluttered in the breeze. The outfit was even more provocative than that of a desert dancer, more elegant than the standard garb of any noble—and it happened to be what she usually wore.

"Let's see..."

Before the eyes of Ashuna and the knights she led was a decidedly suspicious-looking base. It was hidden in the shadows of sand dunes, built from reused ruins with heightened security. In fact, to deem it suspicious, one would have to find it in the first place. It would most likely be near-impossible to locate this cleverly hidden area without a guide.

This was the headquarters of the armed human trafficking group Iron Chain.

Even from a distance, one could get a sense of its enormous scale. Ashuna had also learned in her meeting with Menou that this place doubled as some kind of ceremonial conjuring circle.

Ashuna approached the belly of the beast head-on, making for the front gate. She made no effort to hide or sneak in. Instead, she strode forward with the confidence of a king.

The guards noticed Ashuna and watched her alertly.

They were still outside of the range of Guiding guns. Stopping a fair distance

away, Ashuna drew her sword.

“Those guns might be convenient and dangerous, to be sure, but unlike Guiding vessels with crests, they aren’t very practical.”

She was speaking more to herself than anyone else. Unlike crest conjurings, Guiding guns didn’t require an invocation. One could harm other people just by pulling a trigger, no knowledge of materialogy or crestology required. In exchange, they had a limited range, and there was no way to increase or decrease their power.

Ashuna charged her broadsword with Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Double Invoke [Slash: Expansion, Flameburst]

The night was illuminated.

The power drawn from her soul flowed into the sword and activated the crest conjurings, creating a massive sword made of flame.

“Guess we’ll let ourselves in.”

The violent flames pushed back the quiet night, their vicious heat scorching the cool air. As the fiery blade burned brilliantly, the men standing guard gaped up at it in disbelief.

Then the massive burning sword swung down without hesitation.

As the blade of flame closed in, the guards scrambled away in a panic. This was far beyond what they could handle with their Guiding guns. They scattered like roaches, not even bothering to sound the alarm.

The sword kept its momentum and exploded just as it hit the gate.

With that massive explosion, everyone in the base turned their attention toward the Princess Knight, whose sword once tore through a castle. In addition to those who were already on guard, even the people who were sleeping had jumped awake. As the base quickly dissolved into chaos, Ashuna Grisarika walked forward without hiding, without hurrying, and led the knights through the gate she’d destroyed into the headquarters of Iron Chain.

Her plan to deal with the force that came to counterattack them was

exceedingly simple.

As she bathed in the murderous gazes of the hostiles in front of her, Ashuna's eyes crinkled delightedly.

"Not bad."

The place was turning into a battlefield. Several assailants jumped forward to attack. As she fended them off, Ashuna kept pushing forward. The sporadic nature of the counterattacks was an invitation. They obviously wanted to guide Ashuna somewhere, and she was happy to oblige.

They led her into a dead end surrounded by buildings on three sides. The walls had openings for guns to shoot through.

"Oh-ho?" Ashuna whistled at what appeared in front of her. The way they'd deployed their resources in response to her attack showed the high quality of their personnel. And more than anything, the three massive opponents in front of her made her heart dance with excitement.

Guiding armored warriors.

They weren't autonomous conjured soldiers—they were exoskeleton-like conjured weapons that were steered by human pilots. When three of them appeared before her, Ashuna flapped a hand at the knights behind her, gesturing for them to back away.

In the short time they'd known her, Ashuna had completely earned the trust of the knights. They nodded at one another and left the area.

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Invoke [Slash: Expansion]

Ashuna's sword stretched to block the path of the Guiding armored warriors as they tried to chase after the knights.

"Hold it. You're going to decline my invitation? It's a man's duty to dance with a lady who's offered her hand, you know."

"...Good point."

A muffled voice responded from within: the man piloting the Guiding armor. He pushed Ashuna's blade aside and turned to face her.

“We can just kill you first, then go after them.”

“Oh?” The corners of her lips quirked. “Let’s see you try. Don’t bore me now, all right?”

Ashuna grinned viciously and struck.

The front gate of the base was sent flying with a loud *boom*. With that explosion as their signal, Menou and Sahara sneaked inside.

They were headed for the building that she had guessed was the main stronghold when she rescued Akari. They did a quick sweep of the first floor, then headed to the second to destroy the entrance. Just as they were soundlessly sprinting down the hallway, both girls stopped at once.

A conjured soldier appeared from around the corner.

It had a spiderlike shape, with eight long limbs and a small Guiding furnace built in that appeared to be powering it. Its central trunk was about the size of a human torso, while the legs had small claws that allowed it to climb on the wall.

Those legs were more than deadly enough weapons to destroy a human. The spider lunged, thrusting two of those legs forward.

“Ah?!”

Menou and Sahara dodged to the left and right respectively, avoiding the attack by a hair.

Failing to stab them, the legs scraped across the floor. *It’s certainly strong enough to kill*, Menou thought, calmly assessing the opponent. As she used her sharp senses to dodge each attack, she thrust her dagger into a joint, then grimaced.

The blade didn’t break through.

“Shoot.”

The joint felt thick and hard, yet elastic as well. Even attacks aimed at the more fragile-looking areas didn’t seem to work.

“A Blue Spider,” Sahara muttered without taking her eyes off it. “It’s an insect-style soldier specialized in indoor combat.”

“You clearly learned a lot on the lines of defense against the Mechanical Society. So what’s its weak point?”

“Doesn’t really have one. It moves fast. It hits hard. And it’s flexible yet tough, even the legs. Not to mention it has a ton of those. If I had to name a weak point, I guess I’d say it doesn’t have any long-distance attacks.”

Just as Sahara finished speaking, more of the same model of conjured soldier emerged, enough to fill the hallway. Menou, however, had already decided on a plan the moment she heard Sahara’s description.

“Follow my lead, Sahara.” Menou charged her scripture with Guiding Force.

If the enemy didn’t have any long-distance attacks, she would just have to crush it right away with a powerful conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 12:1—

Menou’s construction speed was astoundingly fast, but it still took a few seconds. Sensing that she was about to invoke something, the Blue Spiders all jumped toward her.

But Sahara stood in their way.

“Mm.”

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm—Activate [Skill: Giant’s Palm]

Sahara’s artificial arm produced a palm big enough to cover the entire hallway. The soldiers bit and stabbed at the palm-shaped Guiding Light, trying to break through, but they couldn’t move forward.

It was exactly the backup Menou needed. She used this chance to unleash her conjuring.

Invoke [Strike the nail, strike the nail, all to give support.]

The Guiding Light unleashed from her scripture took the form of countless nails.

As they burst forward, Menou controlled them to fly into the swarm of spiders. Some sent their limbs flying off, while others crushed their torsos and

destroyed their inner workings.

They were wiped out in seconds. Sahara whistled. “Nice going, Flarete. You’ve got serious skills. No normal person could control that many nails.”

“Really? Well, I suppose my command of Guiding Force is the one strength I have to my name.” She closed the scripture and looked around.

It didn’t look like any more attacks were imminent. The fact that so many conjured soldiers were sent their way, however, meant their invasion had been noticed.

The element of surprise was gone now. The enemy would be preparing for them.

“They’ve certainly noticed us now.”

“Let’s split up. If the base itself is a conjuring circle, this building must be the center. You track down the conjurer here, Menou. I’ll go around to the towers in each of the cardinal directions.”

She had a point: The most important goal was to destroy the conjuring circle.

“I’ll go on up, then.”

“All right.”

Leaving Sahara to take care of any remaining attackers, Menou headed upstairs to find the wanted criminal she anticipated lurking there.

I’ll end this in less than a minute, thought the man leading the force dispatched to take on the attacking knights as he accepted Ashuna’s challenge in his Guiding armor.

Guiding armor was a powerful weapon. It automatically connected the pilot’s Guiding Force to the machinery, circulating and amplifying it. The disadvantage was that one couldn’t use other vessels while wearing the armor, but the rewards were more than worth it for the pilot.

He gained immense strength, mobility, and weight that went far beyond his regular body.

These weapons could enhance the Guiding Force of the naturally weak and

make the strong even stronger. There was no training required; just getting into the Guiding armor was enough to grant enormous power, far beyond the Guiding Enhancement of any ordinary knights.

Princess Knight or not, Ashuna was just one person, and they had three Guiding armored warriors on their side. Not to mention there were men armed with Guiding guns within the surrounding buildings. There was no way they could lose.

And in addition to their confidence, the men had vulgar ulterior motives.

Ashuna was too tall, but even so, she was an incredibly rare beauty. And her arrogance as a born royal had a certain appeal. They would beat her down, destroy her dignity, and make her regret ever being born. The man licked his lips eagerly.

Less than a minute into the battle, one of his comrades was cut in half.

“...!”

He probably hadn’t imagined even until the moment he perished that he could be sliced in the Guiding armor. Since it drew out and enhanced the pilot’s Guiding Force, the armor was heavier and harder than any ordinary metal, tougher than a crest barrier.

When Ashuna’s sword slashed down right through the middle of his body, however, the man died without even time to scream. Alarmed by the unbelievable sight, the two remaining men in Guiding armor hastily backed away.

At first, they’d assumed surrounding her with three Guiding armored warriors would be enough to crush her. Their armor could deflect most attacks, and they had strength and weight that outmatched most humans even with Guiding Enhancement. Since there were three of them, surely they could defeat any opponent—knight, priestess, or otherwise.

And yet, the woman in front of them had somehow pushed back one of the men surrounding her, then cut him down as he lost his balance.

Cover fire sprayed from the windows in an obvious show of panic. Many of the bullets hit the ground, sending up clouds of dust. But they couldn’t stop

Ashuna's movements. She kept sprinting forward, even as bullets struck the ground at her feet. As she zigzagged steadily across the uneven ground, the light of Guiding Enhancement left a phosphorescent trail behind her; dazzled by the constantly moving light, the gunmen wavered every which way.

"Don't get carried away, punk!"

The armored warrior stepped into Ashuna's way to stop her.

Ashuna's abilities were certainly exceptional. But she was still just one unarmored woman. If he could prevent her from moving, the Guiding guns could shoot her full of holes while he was protected by his Guiding armor.

"Ha!" Barking out a laugh, Ashuna flung her broadsword aside and grabbed the armor head-on. It was a direct, hand-to-hand contest of strength. And somehow, the one to lose was the man in the Guiding armor.

"How nostalgic. My sister had one of these toys in her collection, you see. I remember being so excited to try it when I was young."

There was no more cover fire. As the man started to panic, he realized why.

He was being used as a shield. If they tried to fire through any of the holes in the three walls, he would be right in the way as he grappled with her. And she was bearing down on him too heavily to allow him to move aside and give them a clear shot. This was no coincidence. They had planned to use Ashuna's determination to trap her, yet now she had lured him into being a shield instead.

"Damn you...! This can't be—"

"But when I tried to pilot one, it got overloaded with power and broke."

Unable to hold up to the contest of strength, the enhanced exoskeleton arm broke under the pressure. Ashuna promptly grabbed the limb, wrenched it out of the shoulder socket, and flung it aside.

"Just goes to show that fighting with your own muscles is the way to go."

Her fist punched through the armor and smashed the head of the man inside.

Now there was only one squad leader left.



“Shoot her full of holes!”

On the leader’s command, the surrounding Guiding gun users began firing indiscriminately.

These guns consumed the Guiding Force of the user each time they were fired, but this was no time to be sparing about it. Unlike when they were taking careful aim before, now they were clearly just shooting without much thought. As the bullets sprayed randomly, the last man charged forward. These guns weren’t strong enough to pierce Guiding armor. He couldn’t defeat her one-on-one, but if she was caught in a storm of bullets...

“This is what I hate about Guiding guns.” Ashuna sighed in disappointment and charged her broadsword.

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Multi-Invoke [Multi-Barrier]

The crest conjuring activated. Several shields formed from her sword. The walls of light not only protected Ashuna herself, but expanded to swallow up the men shooting as well.

Startled by the sudden appearance of barriers in front of them, the men were unable to react in time, and their shots ricocheted back toward them. One by one, they went down groaning from their own bullets.

Observing this result, Ashuna spat in disappointment. “They always go down too easily.”

Ashuna had figured out the shooters’ positions from their firing. The Guiding armored warrior who remained stood there stunned.

“What the...what the hell is happening h—ah!”

Ashuna appeared right in front of his eyes, swinging her broadsword upward. His face twisted as he realized that the last thing he would ever see was the smile of this woman, enjoying the battle from the bottom of her heart.

“You monster...”

“Now, those are some choice last words.” She brought her blade down without a hint of mercy. “It’s embarrassing to hear such high praise from someone you just fought to the death.”

As she grinned with pleasure, the two halves of the Guiding armored warrior collapsed behind her. Ashuna let her broadsword *whiz* through the air, shaking off the blood.

The battle was just getting started.

“Now, who’s next?”

Her appetite for combat still had to be sated, and there were still enemies to defeat. How much of her normally latent power would she be able to let loose today? Wiping blood from her cheek with the palm of her hand, she trembled with the uncontrollable desire to fight.

Ashuna Grisarika wore a half-crazed smile as she threw herself back into the fray.

The gunshots that had been going on for the past few minutes stopped abruptly.

Ashuna must have won that fight. As she assessed the battle situation based on sound, Menou kept moving through the heart of the base, wiping out one floor at a time until she reached the door to the top.

“So you’re here.” A slender young man was waiting on the top floor.

It was the boy who’d seemed to be the leader of the group that attacked them in town before. He turned his cold gaze toward Menou; the right eye was a prosthetic.

He has an artificial body part, too. Alarms went off in Menou’s head.

“I take it that you’re...not the ringleader here.”

The leader, Wolff, was a man near his forties. This young man must have been the other wanted criminal, Miller.

Had Wolff run away, then? And if so, would Sahara catch him? Menou’s mind raced through the possibilities as she steadied her dagger.

“You must be Miller, the vice-captain of Iron Chain. Where’s the leader, Wolff?”

“Killed him.”

She hadn't actually expected him to give her the principal offender's whereabouts, but his response was even more surprising.

"...Killed him? Was it *you*? But why?"

"Wolff decided to scrap this base. What a ridiculous idea. By luring your team in, we'll be able to activate the conjuring circle without a problem."

Another one. When Menou found a second strange connection, her guard went up even higher. "I knew it...so this base itself really is a summoning circle."

"Yep. The kind that activates when conditions are met. Since we can't use veins out here, we just have to provide it with Guiding Force through other means. This circle functions by absorbing Guiding Force from the dead. Wolff knew that and still didn't want his men to die."

"I see."

Evidently, there were different levels of scumminess. Menou grew that much wiser from this unexpected lesson and made a mental note. The former leader had been the type to value his subordinates' lives over his goals.

"And you?"

"You really need to ask?"

He had a point. If he valued people's lives, he wouldn't have killed his leader.

"This conjuring circle. Is it the kind for summoning Otherworlders? You must know that a circle on a level surface won't connect to the other world, correct?"

"No need. There are Otherworlders in this world, too."

At first, Menou didn't understand what he meant.

"Did you know? The barrier around the Mechanical Society is weakening. It's one of the Four Major Human Errors. This circle was made to summon and control a part of it."

A part of one of the Four Major Human Errors. Their plan was to take its power for their own. In other words, Iron Chain was attempting the same thing that Manon Libelle did.

"Done with the questions?"

“Yes. Thank you for answering. Is there any particular reason why you’re being so forthright?”

“Whether I die or you die, it’s not going to change the end result.”

“Don’t worry. Now that I’ve heard all that, I’ll be sure to capture you alive.”

To put it another way, a conditional activation for the summoning circle meant that it wouldn’t activate as long as those conditions weren’t met. Menou just had to make sure that neither she nor Miller died.

“Ha!” Miller sneered. “Go ahead and try, Flarete. If I kill someone like you, my level’s sure to go up.”

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Eye, Inner Seal Conjuration—

Menou’s brow furrowed at the developing conjuring. She’d seen a very similar structure quite recently.

But why? As her doubts began to rise, the conjuring activated.

Activate [Skill: Petrifying Snake Eye]

Light burst out of Miller’s fake eye. Everything the greenish Guiding Light shone on turned to gray stone.

As Menou dived out of the way, she considered the conjured phenomenon. Even if the artificial eye was a Guiding vessel, the conjuring was far too specific. From a materialogy standpoint, there was no way something the size of an eyeball should be able to contain the components for something as unusual as petrification.

“Is that an ancient relic?”

“No.”

She wondered if it was a Guiding vessel from the civilization that existed a thousand years ago, but Miller denied it. His voice carried an uncharacteristic fervor.

“This is power I gained myself.”

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Eye, Inner Seal Conjuration—

Activate [Skill: Scorching Scarlet Eye]

Miller's prosthetic eye changed color from green to red. As the conjured phenomenon unfolded, everything in his line of sight burst into flame. Menou managed to duck down and just barely avoid it. Trailing behind her, the end of her ponytail was singed by the flames.

The smell of burning hair filled her nostrils, but there was no time to worry about that. Menou jumped up toward the ceiling to avoid Miller's line of sight.

He was able to use the same Guiding vessel to invoke a completely different conjuring—a feat normally limited to an ultra-complex vessel like the scriptures of the Faust. And yet, Miller was creating scorching flames just by looking around. Doubting the existence of the threat attacking her wouldn't help her survive it.

One way or another, the source of his power was definitely his artificial eye. Menou kept moving to dodge the attacks from his sight line.

As she jumped into the air, she twisted around and used the ceiling to push off toward the wall. Menou's Guiding Enhancement-heightened physical abilities let her maneuver her way behind Miller.

"I'm impressed you can dodge this."

Miller spun around to chase after her, then focused his eyes on one point. What was he trying to do? As Menou watched warily, a ball of flame formed where Miller's vision was focused.

The flame's level of heat was highly condensed.

Seeing this, Menou immediately sent Guiding Force into the crest in her priestess robes.

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robes, Crest—

The ball of flame contracted.

—Invoke [Barrier]

There was a massive explosion.

At point-blank range, the blast pierced through the barrier created by the crest in her robes. The explosion in the small, tightly sealed room lowered the atmospheric pressure drastically, weighing down her body.

“Well, now you’ve done it!”

That could have easily killed her. Managing to get by with only light burns even as she was blown away by the blast, Menou kicked off the wall to dive toward Miller from the side. If she could entrap him in close-quarters combat, he wouldn’t be able to use those attacks for fear of getting caught in the blast himself. Menou aimed for that as she drew out her dagger.

Miller’s right eye gleamed blue.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Eye, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Bewitching Evil Eye]

“Enough, I’ve seen through you already!”

Menou held the side of her dagger aloft as she shouted. All of Miller’s attacks thus far had been by way of his line of sight. So this time, she used the reflective surface of her dagger to bounce the blue Guiding Light back at him.

“Nngh!”

The blue light ricocheted right into Miller. Trapped in some illusion of his own making, he stopped moving. Menou used that moment to close in. She tried to slash at him, but he regained his senses too quickly.

Miller immediately brought up a thick knife and blocked Menou’s blow.

Their eyes met, and they glared at each other at point-blank range. After having his conjuring reflected back at him, Miller seemed reluctant to use another one.

Hesitation meant an opportunity for attack. Menou swung her dagger again and sliced Miller’s cheek.

“Tch!” Miller lashed back with his knife—a feint, trying to put distance between them. Menou dodged it by a hair, refusing to give an inch. As she narrowly avoided his attack, she used the momentum of the dodge to drive her right leg into her opponent’s knee.

It could have easily broken his knee joint, but Miller managed to tough it out with Guiding Enhancement. His knife swung down toward her.

Menou parried the blade with her dagger. It was a heavy attack, even with

Menou's arm strength boosted by Guiding Enhancement. Miller, sensing that he could wear her down, pushed even harder. Abandoning the prospect of pushing back with brute strength, Menou jumped backward.

As she withdrew, it created an opening. Menou watched her opponent closely to analyze his unusual features.

Miller's physical abilities obviously exceeded Menou's. Without Guiding Enhancement, there would be no comparison at all, and even with it at full throttle, he still seemed to be faster and stronger. His movements were polished, and his hand-to-hand combat skills were on par with Menou's, too. With the addition of his unique conjurings from his artificial eye, he was undoubtedly a dangerous opponent.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Eye, Inner Seal Conjunction—Activate [Skill: Beastly Red Eye]

His eye turned red. But it seemed different from the flame attack he'd used before.

Miller charged toward her head-on. Even with Menou's advanced kinetic vision, his outline seemed to blur with the sheer speed of his movement. It was on a completely different level from the physical abilities he'd shown thus far. This was no ordinary Guiding Enhancement. The conjuring from his prosthetic eye was further augmenting his movements.

But his trajectory was simple to follow. Menou was about to use a conjuring to counter him when suddenly—Miller shot up into the air.

“What?!”

It was a vertical jump with almost no buildup, seemingly using only his ankles. Menou's attempts to read his movement were thrown off by the unusual shift, leaving her frozen in surprise for just a fraction of a second.

But Miller didn't stop moving. He hit the ceiling, pressed both hands against it, bent his knees, and stored up power. He was aiming directly at Menou below him. Miller dropped straight down, like a spear shooting toward the ground.

The floor broke below him.

His kick was all the more powerful with the entirety of his body weight and gravity behind it.

Menou dropped along with the sturdy stone fragments of the floor. She shifted her position in midair and landed on her feet.

But Miller was waiting for that moment.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Eye, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Scorching Scarlet Eye]

Flames as thick as flowing magma flew toward her.

He had aimed for the exact moment that she lowered her guard to focus on landing safely. But the flames didn't reach Menou.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 2:5—Invoke [Rejoice, for the wall that surrounds a pious flock of sheep shall never crumble.]

Unexpected occurrences in the midst of battle were well within Menou's expectations. Which was why she had an ace in the hole that could be played in the nick of time to deal with any such developments.

The wide variety of scripture conjurings was beyond compare to anything else.

A pure wall formed around the advancing flames. Menou was fully aware that she would be open to attack in the moment of landing. She had prepared the defensive conjuring well in advance.

And in the moments before she landed, she invoked another scripture conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:2—Invoke [Drive in the stake and make known the ground where all shall begin.]

Menou's Guiding Force created a stake of light, which drove into the ground at her feet. It wasn't an attack conjuring. She was using it to fix her own Guiding Force in one stable place.

As soon as she finished her preparations, the effects of the barrier wore off. She threw her dagger to fend off Miller as he immediately moved to close in on her.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

Thread made out of Guiding Force formed around her dagger's hilt. As it flew toward him with the thread trailing behind, Miller tossed a knife of his own to block it.

The two blades crashed in midair and went flying. Miller grabbed the now empty-handed Menou's shoulder and flashed his red-tinged fake eye toward her from point-blank range.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Eye, Inner Seal Conjuration—Activate [Skill: Scorching Scarlet Eye]

"Now you die."

"That's my line."

Miller's killer move was a moment too late.

The dagger that was knocked to the ground had ended up buried point-first in the solidified Guiding Force area that Menou had created earlier.

Guiding Force: Connect (via Guiding Thread)—Dagger, Crest—Remote Invoke [Gale]

A burst of wind shot up from beneath Miller's feet.

She had used the Guiding Thread as a conduit to activate the crest conjuring with the Guiding Force she'd solidified in advance. Unaware of this, Miller fell right into her trap.

Miller clutched his eye as he was sent crashing into the ceiling. He couldn't control his movements in midair. As his body spun around, his eyesight spun with it, creating flames that danced wildly throughout the room.

Miller came spiraling back down. As he fell, Menou sent the hem of her robe fluttering in the air, raising her leg in an almost perfectly vertical line—then brought it down on him with all her might.

"OOMPH!"

It was a perfect ax kick.

Menou's heel came down directly on Miller's stomach. The impact when it

smashed him into the ground was intense enough that he choked and spat up bile.

As soon as he was immobilized, Menou mercilessly thrust her fingers into his right eye socket, which contained his prosthetic eye.

“S-stop—”

“I’ll be taking this.”

“...ngaaaAAAAAH!”

She gouged the artificial eye out.

There was a snapping sound like optic nerves being torn apart. Ordinarily, prosthetic eyes were only for show, but it appeared this one was connected to his brain after all.

“A Guiding vessel made with Primary Colors, is it?”

Menou grimaced and tossed the stolen eye far from where Miller could reach it. She could figure out what to do with it later.

Miller’s abilities were astounding. His basic stats were high, and he had very unusual powers on top of it. But that just made him an ideal opponent for Menou.

For better or worse, the likes of Momo and Ashuna generally didn’t go after their opponents’ weak points. They had enough raw power that they favored head-to-head battles. If either of them had faced Miller, there was a possibility that they could’ve been caught off guard by his prosthetic eye’s bizarre abilities and lost.

But Menou had been trained in a fighting style that could take out such strong opponents.

Back when she fought Orwell, the archbishop had nearly managed to shut Menou down with her range of abilities, but that was highly unusual. Menou excelled at both head-on battles and sneakier tactics, so it was almost unheard-of for her to get backed into a corner.

Menou had won.

“Aaaagh... Give it back... I—I need it, or I’ll...”

Miller was covering his eye socket and groaning. It wasn’t bleeding. Instead, it was Guiding Light that came out of the gaping hole. Upon seeing this, Menou was even more certain.

His body had been remade.

In order to match the prosthetic eye Menou had just pulled out, his flesh had a higher percentage of power that was rendering it less than human.

“A *Vessel* attachment... I see.”

Menou quietly repeated the words Sahara had used as she looked at Miller.

Through a stroke of good luck, she’d managed to capture him alive. He was begging for his fake eye back, but that was important evidence. Since Menou had a strong grasp of crestology and materialogy, she intended to analyze it later.

She knocked Miller out with a kick to the jaw.

“That takes care of that—hmm?”

Just as she was thinking about working with Ashuna to destroy the conjuring crest in the guise of a base on which they stood, the door to the room where Menou had been fighting opened. Turning around, she saw Sahara enter.

“You’re done, too?”

“Yep.”

Regardless of whether that was true or not, Menou listened closely. Judging by the sounds she heard from outside, it sounded like Ashuna and the knights were well on their way to victory, too. It might take a little longer, but their domination of the base was going smoothly.

“Well, I’ll let you handle turning this man in.”

“All right.”

Sahara nodded and moved toward Miller.

Menou took a step back. *What’s going to happen next?* She kept her dagger gripped in her right hand instead of putting it away in the holder around her

thigh, watching closely.

Sahara raised her metal right arm and smashed Miller's head open.

"...Heh-heh."

I see. So that's how it's going to go.

She chose to murder the man instead of immobilizing him. As Menou watched, a smile spread across Sahara's face.

"It won't be long now until the conjuring circle activates." Her smile was terribly twisted. "It's a pity we weren't able to take out a single one of the knights or Ashuna Grisarika, but...at least I managed to separate you from Akari Tokitou and Momo. You're exhausted from battle, too. Not half bad."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You don't look surprised."

"Well, I had my suspicions."

Menou had been forming this theory ever since she saw Sahara's conjuring. The nature of its construction was definitely strange.

"That arm. It's the same sort of thing as the prosthetic eye Miller here was using, right? Like I asked you before, is your arm all right?"

"I already told you."

Once she'd fought Miller, her suspicion had turned to near-certainty. There were too many similarities between how the two of them spoke and acted. At first, she thought they were in collusion, but evidently, it was more than just that.

"This is my power that I gained in the eastern Wild Frontier, the Mechanical Society." As she spat out a bitter reply, Sahara clenched her fist on her right arm. "Menou..."

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjuration—

The basic structure of her conjuring was just like that of Miller's.

"I'm going to surpass you in this fight."

Activate [Skill: Guiding Cannon]

After the squad led by the Guiding armored warriors was wiped out, the enemy scattered.

The knights who had separated from Ashuna were working together to defeat the rest.

“We’re lucky we were able to get help from such a skilled priestess.”

“That’s our Princess Ashuna.”

The criminals were running around frantically, clearly not getting any orders from central command. The fight had already turned into a matter of hunting down the remaining enemies.

“But we haven’t just been tricked into helping destroy Iron Chain, right?”

Their primary goal was to capture a certain woman who’d fled from the east. While they’d entered the lawless desert of the central Wild Frontier to chase her, they weren’t expecting to have to fight this so-called Iron Chain group.

They were only after one lone criminal.

A fugitive who started to turn into a conjured soldier on the front lines of the eastern Wild Frontier, but fled into the lawless area of the central Wild Frontier.

“It’s not that surprising for a confident criminal to join forces with an armed group of thugs, but still.”

“Even if we have been fooled, there’s no harm in destroying a human trafficking operation while we’re at it, right? Iron Chain is a group of scumbags who think they can kidnap people within lawful nations just because they were under Genom Cthulha.”

“Ha-ha, true. This is a good opportunity.”

Knowing that justice was on their side along with the tide of the battle, the knights laughed among themselves.

“Hopefully we still can catch the criminal we’re after and fulfill our mission, though.”

“Yeah, since she got involved with the Mechanical Society but managed to

escape.”

“We can’t let her get away with it, that’s for sure.” The knight scowled as he spoke the name of the criminal they were chasing. “Not a wanted criminal like the traitorous nun Sahara.”



The Traitorous Scripture



All she wanted was to be special.

Sahara knew she was a mean, cowardly person.

She was deeply jealous, overly sarcastic, impulsive, and far too quick to dislike people.

The aloof attitude she maintained on the surface was a mask to hide the ugliness of her true nature. Whenever she saw someone exceptional, the flames of jealousy burned within her, and she despised herself all the more for being so petty.

She felt like iron sand that had been blown off a giant rock by a storm, sinking to the bottom of a river to rot and turn black. And she hated herself so much that she could hardly stand it.

That was why she wanted to be special.

To be more powerful than other people.

If only she were stronger, surely she could be kind to others.

Or so she thought.

Sahara first came to the monastery when a certain human trafficking organization was destroyed.

The brutal battle between Flare the Executioner and the Director of the Fourth. When the dispute that involved every nation on the continent finally ended, the organization that had kidnapped Sahara was taken down as quickly and carelessly as an afterthought.

For Sahara, being rescued by Flare was a very special memory. At the time, she had been locked up in a cage to be sold as a sacrifice for Original Sin Conjurings.

“A kid?”

Flare barely spared her a glance. But the woman with the short, dark-red hair, crossing blades with the enemy using only a dagger, was burned into Sahara’s memory.

She was so cool.

Sahara admired Flare’s attitude.

She always had a unique air about her and never let others influence her. Sahara wanted so badly to be just like her.

Once she was freed, Sahara had nowhere to go.

She was originally sold into captivity because her parents, who were part of the Commons, were desperately impoverished. After she was released from the human trafficking organization, Sahara ended up being brought to the monastery because of her high aptitude for Guiding Force.

So for Sahara, being brought to that clearly unusual monastery was actually a stroke of good luck.

Despite being in the holy land of the Faust, the monastery was isolated from everything else. The atmosphere was so strictly controlled, and the education program so rigid, that one might think it was designed specifically to break young children’s hearts.

But Sahara welcomed the severe training that was imposed upon her. Because of the bizarre nature of the place, she felt like she might be able to become someone special if she trained here. When the stress got so intense that it felt like it would crush her spirit, she took it out on weaker opponents. There were some kids at the monastery who promised to help one another survive, but Sahara never hesitated to kick any of them down.

She was going to be just like Flare, the woman who’d saved her.

Sahara was able to throw herself into her training because she had a clear goal, and she was willing to sacrifice anything and anyone to do it, even her fellow trainees.

She raised her grades through training and lowered those of the others. While

she was striving to become a priestess as quickly as possible, using whatever means necessary, she heard that Flare had captured the Director of the Fourth and would be promoted to a Master and put in charge of their monastery.

Hope began to fill her heart.

Flare was a living legend among Executioners.

She was also the person who'd saved Sahara from the human trafficking organization, even if it was indirectly. She fantasized that Flare might even take a personal interest in her as a successor.

But that didn't happen.

Flare never even showed her face at the monastery. Sahara was disappointed, but she focused all her efforts on training nevertheless.

Crestology and materialogy required memorization of complex steps and a wide breadth of knowledge; Guiding Force manipulation involved delicate mental concentration; physical training emphasized straightforward bodybuilding and painful exhaustion.

All of these were humble tasks, far from the glorious specialness that Sahara longed for. Then one day, Master Flare brought a vacant-looking little girl with chestnut hair to the monastery.

She was an utterly ordinary girl, albeit with a mildly pretty face. Sahara likely wouldn't have given her a second thought were it not for the fact that Flare was the one who brought her to the monastery.

All along, Flare had never bothered with the monastery at all, but after Master Flare brought that chestnut-haired girl, she stuck around and basically gave her nonstop one-on-one instruction.

Rage bubbled up within Sahara.

Why was she so angry? She couldn't put it into words, but whenever she saw Master instructing that chestnut-haired girl, her irrational annoyance grew.

There was nothing impressive about that girl. Her conjuring abilities, Guiding Force levels, and physical potential were all lower than Sahara's. If anything, she might have better composure than Sahara, but that was it. In fact, whenever

Sahara challenged her to a one-on-one sparring match, the other girl never won once.

Her abilities were average at best, yet she'd somehow caught Master Flare's eye.

While Flare never noticed Sahara at all.

As Sahara struggled with confusing feelings of frustration, a newcomer arrived who cried constantly. Judging her as an easy mark, Sahara gathered her classmates and surrounded the girl.

She intended to make the girl cry even more as an outlet for her stress. Sahara had no doubt that she would be a weak, easy target.

Instead, the girl punched her in the face and beat up all the other girls, then straddled her and punched her repeatedly.

It was a highly unexpected counterattack.

Her face contorting with tears, Sahara vowed never to approach the new girl again. After some investigation, she committed the name Momo to memory and carefully kept her distance.

That was when she learned that you can't always tell how dangerous someone is by their appearance. Since the chestnut-haired girl was also starting to surpass her in training by that time, Sahara became increasingly frantic to focus on increasing her own skills.

Surely, the only reason she was in danger of losing to that slow, spacey chestnut-haired girl was because Master was giving her personal training. So Sahara decided to secretly spy on the pair while they trained together.

She saw when the chestnut-haired girl got ribbons from Master.

Two thin red ribbons.

No other child in this monastery had ever received such a luxurious gift. The flames of jealousy burned even brighter.

Why was it always *her*?

Sahara seethed with frustration, but if that was all, then it probably would

have smoldered out.

But the next day, of all things, the girl gave them to Momo.

Even though the chestnut-haired girl was the one who had received them, Sahara saw them in the violent crybaby's hair. She burned with an unbelievable amount of rage. During the group's bathing time, she even attempted to steal the ribbons.

Momo sensed Sahara's presence and promptly caught her, punched her repeatedly until she could barely move, and even tore off her clothes and stole them.

Sahara cried in secret, wondering why she would take her clothes, but decided it was best not to do anything else to her.

"You kids can leave this monastery now."

Some time later, Flare abruptly announced that she was releasing the students from the monastery.

"We're not getting rid of you or anything. But those of you who want to stay will just be moved to a normal monastery."

While the other kids seemed reassured and excited by this, Sahara was indifferent. She intended to stay at this monastery. She was determined to complete her training and become special, unlike the other kids.

"Just live a normal life. It's not like you know anything big anyway. If you guys are saved, this one's just going to carry that much bigger of a burden."

Until she saw the chestnut-haired girl standing behind the Master, who was laughing heartily.

Then her feeling that she could stay here and learn to be special vanished all at once.

Her head sank into her hands as her heart surged with such maddened emotions that she wanted to rip her chest open.

Master Flare never looked at anyone else, yet she was devoting herself to educating this chestnut-haired fool, giving her ribbons as a gift, and even listening to her obviously foolish requests.

Was this girl really so special that she deserved all that?

The hopes and adoration she felt when Flare first rescued her shattered to pieces. A feeling akin to loneliness began to seep into Sahara's heart through the tiny cracks forming in it.

Sahara decided to leave Flare's monastery.

On the day she gathered her things and prepared to depart, she investigated the chestnut-haired girl and learned for the first time that her name was Menou. Then she went around and spoke ill about her to the others, as a sort of parting gift.

"Does she think we're all in her debt now? She's got to be planning something. What a creepy girl. She's just as crazy as Master."

When Momo figured out that she was the source of this slander, she beat Sahara up until she could scarcely speak anymore.

Sahara still just gritted her teeth and bore it, refusing until the very end to apologize.

When she left the monastery, she looked back only once.

The chestnut-haired girl—Menou—had her usually unkempt hair tied up in a black scarf ribbon. For some reason, Sahara could tell at a glance that it was made out of her own clothes that Momo had stolen.

After that, Sahara transferred to a normal monastery.

It was a pure, noble monastery with no ties to the dark side of society. Instead of intensely training future Executioners, they took in girls with nowhere else to go as nuns and educated those who were interested to eventually become priestesses.

Sahara's desperate desire to be special had shriveled and faded. One reason was that there was no telling where another Momo-like individual might be hiding. She lived as modestly and reservedly as she could.

In the local church, Sahara became a reasonably talented honors student. She was told that she was a promising youngster, that she could likely earn her priestess robes before the age of twelve. She'd received a self-esteem-boosting

assessment without even trying terribly hard.

After that, her bad attitude subsided, and Sahara naturally became a more sociable girl.

As these relatively peaceful days passed, she heard rumors about Menou.

The youngest person ever to become an Executioner. The alias of Flarette. The perfect record of completed missions.

The specifics of her many accomplishments even reached Sahara's ears. Menou was making a name for herself, even if it was only in the underbelly of society.

Sahara was still only a nun.

For the first time since she left that monastery, her faded feelings of jealousy began to swell up again.

She needed results. She had to hurry up and graduate from the black robes of a nun to the white of an assistant priestess, and then the indigo of a fully-fledged priestess.

She had to do it as soon as possible.

She had to do it, or...or what?

Pushed onward by an impatience she couldn't quite explain, Sahara transferred to the front lines of defense against the Mechanical Society in the eastern Wild Frontier, seeking a chance to climb the ranks.

Others tried to stop her, but Sahara forced her way through. If she went into battle, she could distinguish herself. So she chose the place that would offer her the most opportunities to fight.

The battlefield lived up to its reputation.

The lines of defense on the eastern Wild Frontier were also known as the dumping ground of the Mechanical Society.

Absurdly enough, it was just an area where the conjured soldiers that made up the Mechanical Society were frequently discarded.

The only conjured soldiers that came out of the Mechanical Society were

composed of a single Primary Color, but if two Primary Colors combined outside, they became far more dangerous. If a conjured soldier with all three Primary Colors was formed, there were multiple instances of them destroying entire nations. The rules of these combinations were unclear, but one thing was certain: The more conjured soldiers of different Primary Colors were nearby, the greater the likelihood of a combination became.

Knight-style, dragon-style, angel-style, and insect-style. All kinds of conjured soldiers advanced from within the Mechanical Society. They had to be destroyed as quickly as possible. These opponents had a huge amount of material resources, though their lack of strategy was the one saving grace. It was said that one year there would equal a lifetime's worth of battles for the average priestess, and that soon proved to be true.

Sahara fought frantically and recklessly.

With the crest in the gauntlet on her right arm, Sahara excelled at close combat, even in the eastern Wild Frontier. The veterans who had fought there the longest often whispered advice to her.

“Don’t get involved with them. Don’t let them control you. If you hear the voice of the world, choose death instead without hesitation.”

As they explained, fighters near the border of the Mechanical Society sometimes received messages from this so-called voice of the world and became obsessed with it, devoting themselves to battle. Depending on the individual, some ended up killing their comrades, while others resisted restraint and ventured deep into the eastern Wild Frontier, never to be seen again.

Sahara couldn’t be bothered with these vague warnings, nor did she try to glean more specific information. The battlefield here was harsh. It was only natural that some might go mad. Not long after she dismissed these as tall tales, she heard the newest rumors.

Menou had defeated Archbishop Orwell in Grisarika Kingdom. And she fought off the Major Human Error Pandæmonium in the port city Libelle in Vanira Kingdom.

It was the next day after Sahara heard about these far-too-impressive feats. She had ventured farther and deeper than usual, into enemy territory, when

she was seized with a strange sensation.

Character name: Sahara. Data has been registered.

It was a disconnected echo, as if it was coming from within the world itself.

Welcome to Container World. You have acquired level-up functionality. By defeating enemies, you can now gain experience points, raise your level, and acquire skills. Now that you have gained the ability to expand your Vessel, please enjoy your adventure in this world.

She heard a strange voice.

It was as if it was timed perfectly to take advantage of her momentary mental weakness.

The voice seemed to promise that if she leveled up, she could become stronger than ever before.

You have leveled up.

She heard the voice again when she defeated a conjured soldier.

At first, she assumed she was hearing things, but the voice came again each time she defeated another conjured soldier. It was as if the world was speaking directly into her head.

You have leveled up.

When she defeated conjured soldiers, her level went up.

You have leveled up.

Defeating monsters raised her level, too.

You have leveled up. You have leveled up. Skill acquired. You have leveled up.

When her level went up, her vessel expanded. She was able to acquire unusual conjurings called skills without any special training. Her base amount of Guiding Force, which was usually decided at one's birth, expanded.

She was getting stronger.

As she looked at the increasing numbers, she could feel that more clearly than she ever had.

It worked out perfectly for her. She had come here to make a name for herself, after all. So if she found a way to get stronger, of course she would embrace it.

You have leveled up. You have leveled up. You have leveled up. Skill acquired. You have leveled up. Skill acquired. You have leveled up. You have leveled up. Skill acquired. You have leveled up. You have leveled up.

Gradually, it became more difficult to raise her level.

This wasn't enough.

Just as she was wondering what to do, a voice whispered from within her heart.

Couldn't you just kill people?

Sahara shuddered.

That was definitely not right. There was no way she would come up with an idea like that on her own. She couldn't believe it, and yet the idea stuck in her head no matter how hard she tried to forget it.

It wasn't right to kill people. Sahara firmly believed that as she fought. At any given moment, she felt a strange tug, like a string of some kind was about to snap somewhere inside her.

The defense lines of the eastern Wild Frontier. In the midst of their ongoing battle to destroy the conjured soldiers that arose there, Sahara encountered none other than Genom Cthulha.

The beast of the Commons. The Priestess Slayer and conqueror of the eastern Wild Frontier. Despite being born in this world, he was said to have power strong enough to match the Pure Concept abilities of the lost ones; he was a freak of nature who exceeded human limits despite being one himself.

If she defeated him, Sahara could surely be special.

Normally, she would never have even considered fighting someone like that.

But Sahara stepped inside the Mechanical Society and challenged Genom.

"So how do you feel now?"

The encounter was over in an instant. It couldn't have even been called a real fight.

Holding Sahara's torn-off right arm, the man looked down at the dying girl.

"Why did you try to challenge me? Looks like you're mixed up in the Mechanical Society, but...you shoulda just run from me, yeah? I mean, even you musta known I can't leave the Mechanical Society."

He was a very strange man indeed. Pieces of his body were missing. And yet, the cross-sectional gashes in his body were overflowing with Guiding Light. Strangest of all, the man had no face.

There was a huge, gaping hole where his face should have been. He looked so inhuman that it was hard to tell whether he was a person at all.

A Guiding Force life-form.

A supernatural being who cast off their physical body and transcended the framework of humanity. It occurred to Sahara that this must be the end result of a person who raised their level high enough.

"Why...?"

The reason was simple.

Because she wanted to be special.

Sahara wanted to be more special than Menou. After hearing the rumors about her latest accomplishments, Sahara realized she could never catch up to Menou with normal means. So she thought that if she defeated Genom, perhaps then she could surpass the other girl.

But she didn't want to share that unspeakably foolish reason with this man.

"Because I... I didn't eat breakfast this morning."

So she swallowed the truth before it escaped and talked about her morning instead.

"I went out without breakfast, and then it rained. My clothes got wet, my boots got muddy, my hair *was* a frizzy mess. And after all those annoyances, I ran into you."

She described all the ridiculously minor inconveniences of her afternoon.

“I was in such a bad mood, I didn’t even care anymore, so I decided to challenge you.”

And she made it the reason for her death.

Once she said it, she realized: *That was surprisingly close to the real reason.* After hearing about Menou, she’d granted the Mechanical Society entrance into her weakened heart. Half aware that she could never catch up to Menou, she became self-destructive and challenged Genom.

“Heh...hee-hee-hee.”

Somehow, it was all so funny that she started laughing.

If she was going to die anyway, it might as well be for a reason like that. When Genom heard her reason for dying, his one remaining eye softened.

“Oh yeah? Is that right? Well, that ain’t a half-bad reason. It wouldn’t have been so bad to be killed over such a stupid thing, but...guess I missed my chance. If I asked your reason first, I might’ve let you kill me, but now I let that go to waste.”

Genom didn’t kill Sahara.

The next time she woke up, Sahara’s right arm had inexplicably been replaced with a prosthetic. She realized that the Mechanical Society’s effects on her had gotten stronger. It was trying to devour Sahara, from her spirit to her body.

A few days later, Sahara fled the eastern Wild Frontier. She intended to sneak away quietly, but one day, a veteran priestess noticed her right arm.

“That girl’s been affected by the voice of the world. Her spirit is being consumed and controlled. It’s too late for her! If we don’t do something, she’ll become a conjured soldier!”

On that priestess’s command, Sahara was nearly killed without mercy.

Instead, she ran.

Even with her increased level, it was a stroke of good luck that she managed to get away from the experienced priestesses and soldiers working together to

stop her. They assumed for some reason that Sahara couldn't leave the eastern Wild Frontier, so there was a gap in their ranks when they surrounded her.

After she fled for days nonstop to shake off her pursuers, Sahara arrived in the Balar Desert. There, she thought long and hard about what she should do and finally reached a conclusion.

She would kill Flare's successor, Flurette, also known as Menou.

That was the only option left to Sahara.

She had been trained for a while as an Executioner, even if it was incomplete. By following the trail of her former classmate's accomplishments, she was able to predict her next move.

Examining the information, she formulated a plan to have Menou meet up with the knights who were chasing Sahara and clash against the nearby criminal group Iron Chain. Once they weakened and exhausted each other, Sahara would swoop in and wipe them all out.

Which was why Sahara made contact with Iron Chain and gave them information about Menou.

Sahara was only locked in the cell to wait in case Menou showed up. She predicted that Menou would be less likely to suspect her if she was clearly a captive, nothing more.

Even as she formed this plan, she was assessing her own situation as objectively as possible.

The voice she heard, the strange expansion of the *Vessel*, the outbreak of symptoms on the front lines of the Mechanical Society.

When she put together everything that had happened to her, she realized how dire the situation really was. Her spirit was being consumed. The idea of killing Menou to raise her own level clearly didn't come from Sahara's former self.

...Or did it?

Sahara's desire to be special was of her own will.

Wasn't she just claiming her spirit was being taken over as an excuse? Could it

be that she just wanted to pin the blame on the Mechanical Society?

Why did she want to become special anyway?

Sahara thought long and hard behind the iron bars.

Her adoration for Master Flare had long since shattered. Sahara knew she could never be like Flare and would never get her attention no matter how hard she tried.

That was why her feeling of wanting to be special had lost the luster it had in her youth.

It coiled in her chest like a dark desire, far too dense and muddy to be called a dream.

What was it, then? She didn't know, but she wanted to be special.

Being special was all she could think about.

As she crouched inside the cell in a daze, Menou arrived. The Iron Chain gang started attacking her. It was the perfect chance. Sahara walked unsteadily to the bars and peered out at their battle.

She was dimly aware that her plan was full of holes.

What would happen if Menou knew that Sahara was a wanted escapee? Even if she was too focused on guarding her Otherworlder to hear such things, Momo was probably her aide and might fill her in. And if Menou mentioned Sahara or her distinguishing features to the knights, then it would all be over.

There were plenty of places where it could fail.

But Sahara still decided to try to make contact with Menou, in spite of her patched-together plan. She had to raise her level. There was nothing more important to her than leveling up and unlocking new skills.

She was going to be special.

Clack. Sahara rattled the bars.

Menou looked over at her.

Her pale skin. Her eyes that held the faint color of blood. Her light-chestnut hair. All of her coloration was strangely light, making her almost mysteriously

beautiful.

Clack. She rattled the bars.

Sahara hated Menou.

She hated her so much.

She was so jealous, so bitter, so resentful. She hated her so, so much—and admired her so much that her heart was charred with longing.

Sahara only turned out this way because Menou existed.

She never wanted to see her or Momo again.

But she never really wanted them to die, either.

And she certainly never felt like she wanted to kill them.

All she really wanted...

All she wanted was to be special.

Sahara knew that she was a mean, cowardly person.

She was deeply jealous, overly sarcastic, impulsive, and far too quick to dislike people. When Master brought that absentminded child to the monastery, Sahara couldn't stop wondering what the other girl had that she didn't, and she despised herself all the more for being so petty.

She felt like iron sand that had been blown off a giant rock by a storm, sinking to the bottom of a river to rust and turn black. And she hated herself so much that she could hardly stand it.

That was why she wanted to be special.

To be more powerful than other people.

If only she were stronger, surely she could be kind to others. Or so she thought.

She didn't want to defeat anyone. She didn't want to hurt anyone. And she certainly never wanted to kill anyone.

She just thought that if she got stronger...maybe she could be a beautiful person who did things for other people, like Menou.

That was all.

So if she killed Menou and got her experience points, she could level up. She could surpass her at last.

She could finally be special.

“Listen, Menou.”

She had to get stronger. She had to kill Menou. She just had to keep raising her level.

Then surely she could someday escape from the cage of iron sand that was sinking her pitiful vessel.

“You have to do something about the Vessel...”

She was sure of it...

“You have to kill me.”

So why did she make such a request? Even now, as she raised her fist with resolve to kill Menou, she didn't really know.

It was just that she happened to notice that the black scarf ribbon Menou was wearing was made out of clothes Sahara herself used to wear...and without thinking, she wrapped her arms around the girl from behind and whispered that in her ear.

The photon flash of Guiding Light shot out of her raised palm and grazed Menou's cheek.

There was a soft *sizzle* of burning skin. Before the heat on Menou's cheek could turn into pain, Sahara was leaping toward her.

Sahara clenched her fist, no doubt assuming that Menou had lost her balance while dodging the first attack. She pulled back her metal arm, aiming for a body blow.

Menou raised her dagger to parry it.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjunction—Activate [Skill: Guiding Cannon]

A burst of Guiding Light from Sahara's elbow accelerated her fist forward.

It would be impossible to block her completely. Giving up on holding her ground, Menou chose to let the force blow her backward instead.

As she flew through the air, Menou flipped around and landed easily.

She wasn't shocked by the sudden attack. Menou had never trusted Sahara completely in the first place.

All they had in common was the fact that they were raised in the same monastery. If anything, the fact that someone she knew from that monastery had randomly shown up in her path seemed more suspicious.

She had been wondering why the timing worked out like this.

"Iron Chain... No, I can't imagine you were working for them."

"No. I'm sure you've realized this, but I happened to know about Iron Chain's plans already. So I figured I would lend them a hand in their efforts to expand the Mechanical Society, that's all."

Miller and the Iron Chain group had figured out Menou's movements because Sahara was feeding them information.

But why would she do such a thing?

"I'm not sure I understand your motives. What do you gain by killing me?"

"My level goes up."

Menou's face twitched. "Level? What happens when it goes up, then?"

"I get to be special. More than other people."

"...How disturbing. You don't want to be human anymore?"

"You wouldn't understand."

How had she reached a conclusion like that?

"Someone who was special from the beginning could never understand." Sahara had no interest in trying to reach an understanding with Menou. "There have been a few hitches, like the fact that you knew the Princess Knight somehow, but you still danced for me perfectly. Now that you and those knights are exhausted, I just have to kill you, and it'll all be over."

She had played both sides, led them to each other so that they would fight. Once both parties were worn out from battle, Sahara planned to defeat them with ease.

Menou didn't get angry that she'd been deceived, nor did she appear shocked by the setup.

"Level... Level, hmm? I see. I've heard the rumors about the eastern Wild Frontier, but I never expected to see it for myself."

Instead, she just smiled coldly. Sahara's right arm reflected in Menou's eyes.

"There's one fundamental flaw in that plan."

Sahara's brow furrowed at Menou's mocking tone. "What do you mean?"

"You abandoned your Executioner training and never even bothered to earn the robes of a priestess of the Faust. Do you really think a spoiled little nun has what it takes to kill me?"

Sahara's eyes burned with rage, while Menou's glittered cold.

Taking a deep breath, Sahara steadied herself.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjunction—Activate [Skill: Silver Gauntlet]

Her right arm transformed.

The metal pieces split apart and expanded while Guiding Light filled the newly formed spaces and solidified a new shape. Her once-slender arm became a large, sturdy, shining gauntlet.

The Guiding Light that was used to form the transformation shot out with a crackling sound.

"Well, I suppose this is about what I expected."

That was impossible, of course.

The transformation of Sahara's right arm far surpassed any known Guiding Force technique. Even for the Faust, Guiding prosthetics were limited to imitating a real arm. They had no technology for creating arms that could transform.

But Menou didn't let her alarm show.

"That arm looks awfully heavy."

"You want one, too?" Sahara's expression didn't change as she raised her fist. "It's pretty cool, isn't it?"

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjunction—Activate [Skill: Guiding Cannon]

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 2:5—Invoke [Rejoice, for the wall that surrounds a pious flock of sheep shall never crumble.]

A cannonball of Guiding Force shot out from Sahara's palm.

It was far larger than the ones she'd used thus far. As the dense particles of force flew straight toward Menou, she deflected them with the scripture conjuring she'd already prepared.

The holy wall of the church.

A voice spoke to Menou from outside the wall of light that formed around her.

"I know what you're really made of. We're from the same monastery, after all. Your strength, Guiding Force capacity, faith. All of it is perfectly average."

There was a *clunk* of a fist hitting the wall. It was a light touch, not the loud *crash* of a punch. Sahara was touching the barrier Menou had created.

In the next moment, Menou found out why.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Prosthetic Arm, Inner Seal Conjunction—

Sahara's arm began to transform again.

The upper part of her fist took on a cylindrical shape with a massive stake in the middle. It was so large that Menou could see it even past the wall she'd made.

The energy built up at the bottom of the cylinder released all at once.

—Activate [Skill: Pile Driver]

The massive stake shot out of her arm.

It shook the air with the force of a battering ram. The explosive strength that propelled it forward at point-blank range gave the stake incredible piercing power. The barrier made from scripture broke apart under the immense impact.

“Which means fighting multiple battles after marching through the desert will definitely be tough for you.”

While the shining shards of Guiding Force scattered, Sahara stood with her metal arm held up high. She smirked, having destroyed Menou’s defenses.

“You still wanna keep going?”

She had a plan to wear Menou down, a decent home field advantage, and a prosthetic arm that could destroy Menou’s conjurings. And in this desert, there was no earthen vein. There would be no chance for her to turn things around with a powerful invocation. Menou was at a complete disadvantage.

So when Sahara invited her to surrender, she only had one response.

“This is still a good deal better than the time with Archbishop Orwell.”

Her strength and Guiding Force were dwindling a little. She had her dagger and scripture.

That was plenty. It was hardly any different from her training in the monastery.

“Sahara.”

Sahara responded with only silence, but Menou just smiled gently.

This place was still a conjuring circle that would activate if the right conditions were met. If anyone died, they would further supply the circle with Guiding Force. And so Menou knew exactly what to say.



“I can’t kill you, so don’t worry, I’ll hold back.”

Sahara’s expression sharpened at the challenge. While she was distracted by her thoughts, Menou moved forward.

Menou approached Sahara with unhurried, unsteady steps. There was confusion mixed into the other girl’s rage. Menou’s approach was simply too vulnerable. As she advanced without even readying her dagger, her defense was so full of holes that Sahara must have questioned if she had gone mad with desperation.

Just as it seemed like she might be staggering with exhaustion, she suddenly shifted from sluggish steps to top speed.

“...?!”

Sahara gasped. She couldn’t react in time to the sudden change in tempo. When she quickly drew back, she played right into Menou’s hands. Menou’s kick struck her squarely in the chest as she retreated.

“Ngh—”

Sahara grunted in pain, but she didn’t stop moving.

Holding her ground against the impact of the kick, Sahara used her metallic right arm to counterattack. With the high output of Guiding Force behind her strikes, Menou couldn’t resist them in this state, no matter how hard she tried. No, even if she were at full power, she wouldn’t be able to withstand those attacks alone.

But that was fine.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 6:5—

It didn’t require all that much force to kill a person.

Sensing the construction of a conjuring, Sahara’s attention whipped toward Menou’s scripture. She moved to stop her, unwilling to give her enough time to invoke a scripture conjuring at such a short distance.

Menou abandoned the scripture conjuring.

The small amount of Guiding Force she’d put into the scripture promptly

dispersed. Sahara's expression contorted with surprise. What was Menou playing at? As she stood disoriented in shock, she saw Menou raise her scripture.

The priestess drove a corner of it into Sahara's side.

".....!" Sahara let out a silent shriek of pain.

What Menou had just struck her flank with was a nearly five-hundred-page, metal-reinforced book. The resulting pain was enough to send a normal person writhing around on the floor. Sahara withstood it, but that was the most she could do.

Her movements stopped completely. With an almost relaxed motion, the blade of Menou's dagger cut through Sahara's right shoulder.

Sahara looked at her opponent.

Even covered in sweat, with her bangs sticking to her forehead and wisps of hair clinging to her cheeks, Menou was still beautiful.

"You still want to keep going?"

Menou smiled. Sahara grimaced.

It was all too obvious who had the advantage here.

Why had it turned out like this?

Fully aware of her inferiority, Sahara still fought desperately.

She wanted to escape from her current self. She wanted to be something, anything, different. Wanted something else that she couldn't put into words.

She'd wanted it from the day Master Flare first brought Menou.

Menou was in the position Sahara had wanted. She wasn't better than Sahara in some way. It wasn't like Sahara couldn't beat Menou—she'd won in training plenty of times. It didn't seem like Menou had more potential than her, either. Their circumstances weren't even all that different.

So why couldn't she lay a finger on her?

"Damn it...aaaaaall!" Sahara yelled, overcome with frustration. Ignoring the pain in her shoulder, she launched herself at Menou.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Sahara was supposed to become a new version of herself. She wanted to change, to be a completely different person.

She thought she could change, if only she leveled up and got stronger.

Both of them had been saved by the same Master. She hadn't really set out to save anyone, just happened to rescue them in the process of hunting taboos. That was true for both Menou and Sahara.

But one became her traveling companion, and one was left behind.

What was the difference? Sahara gnashed her teeth.

Only that one was in the right place at the right time.

That was the only way to describe it. The girl who looked up to Flare never caught her eye, while the girl who had lost everything ended up becoming her successor.

Why couldn't it have been Sahara? She raised her fake right arm to pound this unanswerable question into her opponent.

"We're not different at all." Menou quietly gave her an answer. "I'm not really special, and I don't have any hidden talents. I'm sure you knew that much already."

Why would she say something like that?

She wanted Menou to brag. If she put on airs and acted superior because she was the one who got chosen, at least Sahara could have hated her. It would validate her long-held grudge.

Sahara gritted her teeth. Why didn't Menou act more conceited? She was raised by Master Flare, became the youngest Executioner in history, and had defeated so many powerful opponents.

But Menou's dagger was damningly silent.

"I don't want anyone to try to be like me. Master felt the same way. It makes sense, doesn't it? An Executioner exists only to kill other people, after all."

Sahara wanted Menou to be a worse person.

"I don't want anybody else to have to kill people."

The more Menou was a good person, the more miserable Sahara became. She felt tiny and horrible for being unable to accept a beautiful girl like Menou. Just being near her made her heart twinge in pain. In the end, a smile from Menou was enough to fill her with loathing.

If Menou had been a bad person, Sahara could have forgiven herself for hating her.

But Sahara was the bad one.

She childishly envied Menou, resented her, challenged her to battle—and most pathetically of all, she was on the verge of losing.

But what was she supposed to do about being bad?

She couldn't alter the way she felt just by living her life. She couldn't become a different person just by hearing the right words. Even if she tried to change herself, she would still be the same deep down.

She didn't know what was right, couldn't dislodge her deep-seated self-loathing.

So instead, she selfishly made her wishes to someone else.

"I'm begging you, please, just leave me alone."

The next thing she knew, there were tears in her eyes.

Even if she left Menou behind, Menou didn't disappear. She kept hearing rumors about her. She kept finding out about her accomplishments. Far away from her, Menou's fame still gnawed away at Sahara's heart.

Whether she was controlled by the Mechanical Society or not, Sahara's ideal of Menou already threatened to crush her heart.

So there was nothing she could do anymore.

She figured it out, whether she wanted to or not.

How exactly did she want to be special? Sahara suddenly realized the terrible answer.

Without a doubt, Sahara just wanted to be Menou.

"One arm wasn't enough."

A voice whispered in Sahara's mind.

"The person you want to be—you can't become her. Wonder what you are missing? I'll tell you."

The faint whisper came from her right arm.

"You have to be that Vessel."

It was Sahara's own voice.

"Everyone says the same thing. They want to be strong. They want to be special. They want to be better. They want to be like that person they see in the distance. They want to be anything other than themselves. It's selfish. So selfish. Yet so dear. That is the desire that drives you."

A vision of Sahara's own self appeared in front of her, like standing before a full-length mirror.

Sahara reached out for the illusion of herself. For the left hand that was supposed to someday hold a scripture when she became a priestess. She hated herself more than she could describe. From the moment she became aware of this self-loathing that was lodged too deep to destroy, she lost all hope for her life.

"I understand. It's a feeling that so few people can relate to. You hate yourself. Your reflection disgusts you so much that you could vomit. Try as you might to figure out why you hate yourself so much, you spend your whole life rejecting yourself."

She wanted to be someone else. It didn't have to be Menou.

"So cast off that person you hate so much. Destroy the bug that is your own self."

She just wanted to be rid of the person she was.

"Become a Vessel."

Sahara nodded.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—

As if to answer her prayer, a conjuring began from her right arm, independent

of Sahara's own will.

It wasn't just Guiding Force that the conjuring was attempting to consume.

Paint Over—Pure Concept [Vessel]—

The conjuring from her right arm entered her spirit and ate into her soul. As she felt herself becoming someone else entirely, Sahara felt only relief.

Finally, this awful display of hers would be over.

Activate [Possession]

The Pure Concept of *Vessel* that slumbered in Sahara's right arm invoked a conjuring.

Sahara was sucked into her right arm.

There was no other way to describe what happened. The metal that made up her arm consumed her shoulder and spread further. Her prosthetic right arm covered the rest of her body like a film, until Sahara herself could no longer be seen. The metal that surrounded her split apart the three components of her life—body, spirit, and soul—as if devouring them all, transforming them into three colors of Guiding Light.

Sahara's body was broken down thoroughly—not physically, but into different colors of light. She turned into particles of red, blue, and green.

Menou was paralyzed at the construction of the conjuring that occurred.

A Pure Concept.

Particles of light finer than sand unfurled with a *shushing* sound. The Primary Colors were impossible to discern from reality even for Menou's sharp eyes.

Sahara's spirit must have been gradually eroded and changed without her realizing it. In this battle, when she gave up whatever was left of herself, her right arm consumed her spirit entirely and took over her body. It used the soul and spirit of the girl called Sahara as materials to create what she wanted.

And the resulting conjured soldier looked just like Menou.

"Ah, ah, aaah..."

The conjured version of Menou made wordless noises as if to test its vocal

ords. It was a strange voice, sounding at once natural and inorganic.

“Aaah, ahhh...ahhh, so annoying.”

The nameless conjured soldier tilted its head. Its movements were mechanical, artificial. Otherwise, only one feature distinguished it from the real Menou: long hair untied by a ribbon.

“Damned bugs.”

A shiver ran up Menou’s spine. She instinctively understood what the conjured soldier in front of her was, whether she wanted to or not.

It wasn’t just one Primary Color. It was a perfectly complete conjured soldier, with all three components: red, blue, and green. A legendary wish-fulfillment being that could destroy nations and create worlds.

“Bugs. Damned bugs. Begone from my world. I will crush bugs. This world is still full of that horrid bug known as annoying emotions. I must destroy them. I must consume them. I must correct them. I must overwrite them.”

Menou sensed obvious hostility.

Consumed by self-loathing so strong that she abandoned herself, Sahara had become a conjured soldier. The Pure Concept of *Vessel* was giving her the power to fulfill her desire to defeat Menou by turning her into a nameless conjured soldier.

“I must crush all bugs to bring peace to my world.”

Sahara’s inferiority complex and self-contradiction were mingling with *Vessel*’s behavioral principles.

Menou glared sharply at the *Vessel* conjured soldier.

It had clearly modeled itself after her own existence. It wasn’t really Menou, of course, but an ideal concept of her. It was the Menou whom the girl Sahara had aspired to be, alike yet separate.



Sweat trickled down the nape of Menou's neck.

All the fighting she'd been forced to endure thus far had drained her energy.

Her priestess robes were heavy with sweat from her body. Her skin was drenched, yet it wasn't cooling her down nearly enough. The sticky sensation of her ponytail brushing against the back of her neck when she moved felt immensely irritating. Every time she breathed, her lungs protested faintly with pain.

Her stamina had been severely reduced, and she was running low on Guiding Force as well. The sound of her racing heartbeat throbbed in her ears, raising the question of how much longer she could go on.

She was near her limits.

But she wasn't done yet.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 3:1—Invoke [And the oncoming enemy did hear the tolling of the bell.]

She was opening with a scripture conjuring. As Menou activated the conjuring, her opponent jumped up. The bell rang out. A power-imbued sound echoed in every direction, crashing into the *Vessel* conjured soldier in midair.

But the soldier didn't slow down in the slightest.

It shattered the church bell with a powerful kick. Menou stared in shock. Her scripture attack conjuring hadn't worked in the slightest. Having destroyed the bell, Sahara landed and dashed forward. She was fast. With a single step, she was right in front of Menou's nose.

The mirror image of Menou unleashed a punch.

Menou quickly used the scripture as a shield, but the impact was still enough to shake her body.

Not good. She grimaced. Her opponent was preparing a follow-up attack. Just as she sensed that she wouldn't be able to block it in time, her instincts warning her of danger—the wall suddenly exploded open.

The conjured soldier had been struck by a massive blade as it tried to attack

Menou. It was Ashuna. Even more surprisingly, she'd swung her giant sword from outside the room and managed to land it squarely on Sahara's neck.

"She looks just like you. Is this your twin sister or—what?!"

Ashuna's casual greeting faded as she saw the result of her cut.

It was truly impressive that Ashuna had jumped in to the rescue and managed to hit her opponent accurately from the other side of the wall.

Unfortunately, her blade hadn't cut even a little into the conjured soldier's skin.

"Damned bug."

The soldier knocked the blade away and shot forward like an arrow.

Even Ashuna, who excelled at close combat, couldn't follow its movements. It slipped past the broadsword and drove a fist into Ashuna's abdomen, sending her flying with the impact. As her feet left the floor, the conjured soldier grabbed her by the collar and slammed her down.

There was a tremble underfoot.

The tremors shook Menou's heart as well. How could Ashuna be taken down so easily?

It was all the more shocking because Menou knew how powerful Ashuna was.

Without bothering to go after the now-unconscious Ashuna, the conjured soldier fixed its gaze on Menou.

"Crush all bugs. If I am now you, then you are no longer anything more than a bug."

This opponent wasn't creepy like Pandæmonium, or as unknowable or visually repulsive. The words and actions of the being in front of Menou were so hollow that it seemed like you might hear an empty echo if you flicked the outside.

It was purely, mechanically strong. Without the playfulness of Pandæmonium, not a single movement was wasted.

Before the rumbling in the floor faded, the next attack was already crashing

into Menou.

She was able to just barely resist it, but nothing more.

The next attack struck her temple and nearly knocked her out. Alarming enough, Menou was losing track of where she was being hit. Each punch and kick left an impact on her body and mind alike, but she couldn't tell where she was taking damage anymore.

Menou's consciousness was quickly fading.

Her feet weren't on the ground. Her vision was darkening. Her entire body was battered and bruised. Most likely, she was only still alive because somewhere inside the conjured soldier, Sahara only wanted to make Menou surrender.

Something grabbed Menou's head. She felt the faint coolness of metal against her face.

Then she was lifted into the air. Her limbs dangled limply, her body swaying.

She was going to lose.

The word *defeat* flitted across Menou's mind.

As she realized she was going to be defeated and die here, the first words that came to mind were *I'm sorry*.

It wasn't an apology to all the people she'd killed.

Instead, she was thinking of Momo, who was always by her side, and for some reason, Akari.

Menou had never valued her life.

She was fine with the idea of dying, whenever it might happen. Since she was a murderer who went through life killing other people, it seemed wrong for her to want to live herself. So when the time came for her to die in disgrace, she felt she would be ready.

But now that the moment of her death was upon her, it was very different. She was thinking of Momo's face as she slyly slid closer. Akari as she sat up in bed, still mostly asleep.

Not all of Menou's time was spent killing people. She had short bursts of happiness, so trivial that no one would bother trying to share it with others.

Now that she was the one about to be killed, she finally realized something. Menou didn't want to die. She didn't want to let someone kill her. So she had to win.

Even if it meant she had to kill someone else.

"Ahhh..."

Warm blood trickled into Menou's mouth. It was her own blood. The metallic taste reminded her that she was still alive.

It was a striking, revolutionary thought. In that moment, Menou resolved for the first time to kill someone else for her own sake, and she fervently wished to live.

Sahara wanted to win against Menou, wanted to kill her even if it meant giving herself up.

She must have had a good reason.

Menou, however, couldn't just lose for her sake. She didn't know how she could possibly win. Her rational mind whispered that there were some battles that couldn't be won. What could she do against an enemy who seemed impervious to her attacks?

"I will destroy all bugs."

The conjured soldier sent Guiding Force into Menou through its grip on her face.

Guiding Force: Connect—

She had a feeling she knew what was about to happen.

The *Vessel* was trying to possess Menou. It wanted to make Menou another host, just as it had to Sahara. The Mechanical Society of the Pure Concept of *Vessel* had always expanded by taking over everything around it, inorganic or otherwise.

Ever since she was blanched with white when she was young, Menou had lost

the defenses around her spirit. At this rate, the enemy would flow right into her. She cursed herself for being so vulnerable to mental attacks.

Paint Over—Pure Concept [Vessel]—

The power to take over a spirit, break the body down into the three Primary Colors, and rebuild it. Was Menou about to have her spirit consumed and turn into a part of the *Vessel*, just like Sahara?

Just as that untimely end seemed inevitable, she had a flash of inspiration.

If the enemy was entering her spirit, then there was still something Menou could do even with her Guiding Force almost completely drained. She could use the power that still slept inside her.

But the idea was all too fleeting.

Invoke [Possession]

Part of the Pure Concept of *Vessel* flowed into Menou without hesitation. She felt her spirit fill from the inside and begin to drown.

That was Menou's way of introducing herself, by striking directly against her opponent's spirit. All kinds of scenes flowed into her mind, like junk washing up on shore. Sahara's passions were mingled in there, too. The truth of why she was so fixated on Menou struck her square in the heart.

Her attempt to control her opponent from within herself nearly ended in a fleeting failure.

"Ah..."

But then the conjured soldier that wore Menou's face and was trying to replace her gave a small gasp.

Confusion had overtaken the *Vessel*. Everything in this world could be expressed with the three Primary Colors. But since those colors were made of light, there was one color that could swallow up all of them.

That was *Ivory*, emptiness.

"Why is *Ivory* here?"

Menou's spirit and soul couldn't resist, yet the Pure Concept of *Vessel*

couldn't affect her body.

The enemy hesitated.

Menou's arm moved. It was a reflexive reaction. Her instincts told her this was her chance and made a move toward survival. She struck with her dagger. The tip of her blade bounced fruitlessly off the conjured soldier's temporal region. It didn't seem to have any effect, but the grip on Menou's face loosened and let go.

The connection was cut off.

"Hahhh!"

Dropping to the floor, Menou gasped for breath. She started inhaling and exhaling once again. Her entire body was covered in cold sweat, and her chest felt tight and painful. This was the end.

For some reason, the conjured soldier that wore Menou's face was staring at her in fear.

Menou mentally pulled herself back together. She took control of the power that had flowed into her and been left behind.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Drawing it out from inside of her, she ejected it into her scripture.

Scripture, Chapter 13, Full Passage—

A Full Passage invocation from the scripture.

Menou took hold of the Pure Concept power that had entered her spirit, manipulated it, controlled it, and kept sending it into her scripture.

Invoke ["Why?" cried the king. The woman fell. She had taken the spear in the king's stead. The woman said, "It is not for your sake." The king did not understand. The woman's blood soaked the king's feet. "Your life is meant for the Lord." With that, the woman passed—

The sign of the conjuring being invoked was a beautiful cup made of Guiding Light.

—away. The king wept. He did not understand. Why did the woman die? Why

did he let the woman die? There was only one thing he could say for sure.

It was an empty cup, big enough to be held in both hands. A chalice. She kept releasing the Guiding Force that had seeped inside her into the cup in order to manifest its true power.

The spirit of a martyr is so precious, it is almost foolish.]

This conjuring was normally used to link a person's Guiding Force to the earth and activate the astral vein within. The Guiding Force sank into the ground, filling the vein-less desert with an enormous amount of power. It was almost as if it was restoring the flow that had once been ripped away here.

At this rate, there would be no point. The Guiding Force would simply disperse.

But Menou was currently in the center of a conjuring circle.

Guiding Force: Auto-Connect (Conditions Met)—Desert Base, Fort Architectural Conjuring Circle—Invoke [Teleportation]

The massive amount of Guiding Force flowed into the giant conjuring circle and activated it.

That was exactly what Menou intended.

The conjuring circle was created based on two disciplines: materialogy and crestology. The pattern formed by the strategically placed buildings began to glow.

And a small hole opened up in the world.

The hole was so tiny, it was hard to believe it had been created by such a giant conjuring circle and massive amount of power. But it was linked to someplace else. The faraway land of the eastern Wild Frontier, the Mechanical Society, was connected to this hole.

In the next moment, the world creaked.

The incredibly small hole had created a dramatic reaction. Air rushed into it with a roar. The ground shook, the atmosphere trembled, and the three Primary Colors gushed out of it and overwhelmed its surroundings.

Opening a hole in the completely covered world had upset the balance of the Mechanical Society, which was maintained only by the Primary Colors.

An insane amount of power flowed out from the Mechanical Society.

“Damned...bug...”

The first to be affected was the *Vessel* conjured soldier standing close by the hole. The shock wave of Primary Colors, so loaded with power that it was like the world itself was caught in an avalanche, struck the conjured soldier that had Menou’s form and disintegrated it. There was no visual distinction to be made. The surging power was trying to turn everything into its own world indiscriminately. It spread out to overwrite the world as part of its own *Vessel*.

Menou didn’t have enough strength left to stop it.

But there was still one more person here.

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Invoke [Slash: Expansion]

A shining blade stretched to the ceiling.

Ashuna’s attack slashed the base cleanly in half.

The physical damage to the conjuring circle destroyed its effectiveness. The connecting hole disappeared, and the world began returning to normal.

“How exhausting...” Ashuna dragged herself over and slumped down next to Menou. “I swear, it’s always like this when I’m with you.”

“That isn’t my fault.”

Menou was insulted by the implication that she was some kind of troublemaker. She was always the one who got caught up in issues other people caused and had to solve them.

She closed her eyes. Who was stirring up all this trouble, then? As her eyelids blocked out the light, she saw Akari in the darkness.

“But I do agree that was exhausting.”

She felt her consciousness slipping away.

I should go back, she thought. Someone is waiting for me. Right before she blacked out completely, she thought she heard a voice. Not Ashuna’s—

someone else's. Menou couldn't figure out who it was before her mind drifted off.



Far away, in the west of the continent, there was a quiet and peaceful city.

It was famous for its beautiful garden, at the center of which was the Tower of Water, the ancient relic that produced a constant pure stream. The Noblesse governed, the Faust oversaw, and the Commons carried out the necessary tasks.

But this natural order and tranquility quickly fell into ruin.

The living and the dead. In this town, those two categories that were normally clearly distinguished were beginning to blur.

People with blackened skin and clouded eyes walked the streets. What looked like corpses that couldn't possibly be alive were roaming around with unsteady steps.

They weren't just roaming aimlessly, either. The walking corpses were seeking out the living. Those who couldn't escape fast enough were surrounded by the dead and bitten.

The tragedy began with a single dog.

Infected with an Original Sin Conjuring, the dog could cause a contamination conjuring by biting others. As the epidemic spread in just a few short days and screams echoed all over the city, there was still one beacon of hope.

There was a group that led the charge of rescuing the Commons, a combined force from the Faust and the Noblesse. The priestesses protected those who fled into the church with a barrier, and knights armed with swords pushed the moving corpses back. The area of the church was the last light of hope.

Then a graceful young woman appeared.

Her deep-blue hair hung over her shoulder in a braid, and she wore a perfectly arranged kimono without a hem out of place. She had soft, gentle eyes, perhaps reflecting her personality.

The knights hesitated. She looked like a harmless girl, but the situation was strange. She was walking closer among the corpses, making no effort to flee.

“Hey, you! Stop right there!”

Just as a knight called out to stop her, her shadow billowed and shifted underfoot.

“Pardon me.”

A sharp sound cut the air.

The knight standing in front of the girl was sliced diagonally in two. After a moment, his upper half slid to the ground with a dull *thud*.

The knight had been cut by none other than the girl’s squirming shadow.

“Damn yooou!”

It was obvious who was behind that. Judging correctly that the girl must be some kind of demon given human form, the other knight charged.

The girl in the kimono blocked the knight’s sword with her fan. It was an iron fan, used for self-defense. She knocked the blade away and opened the fan fully, revealing a crest.

Guiding Force: Connect—Iron Fan, Crest—Invoke [Wind Blade]

With a flick of her fan, she created a violent gust of wind. The knights in its way were slashed into ribbons.

The last line of defense was broken. A swarm of walking corpses surged toward the newly formed opening.

“That will do, I suppose.”

The girl in the kimono jumped high into the sky. Blasphemously enough, she landed directly on the roof of the church. Using the symbol of faith as a foothold, she looked down at the people’s last resistance from above.

No doubt few people would believe this girl was responsible for creating the calamity that had overtaken this city.

“A zombie apocalypse, didn’t she call it? Yes, this is certainly worth watching. Now I understand why that girl recommended it to me.”

This tragedy all started with a single dog.

The dead attacked the living. Roaming corpses sensed live human beings, tracked them down, bit them, and made them into more of the dead. The epidemic was rapidly spreading through the entire city.

Currently, it had encroached on about 30 percent of the city. None of the dead attacked this particular girl as she watched from the center of the storm.

The reason was simple: because the girl with the fan was one of the dead, too.

Manon Libelle.

She was beautiful to behold, but she was no longer human. Her soul had been offered up in an Original Sin ceremony, allowing her to be reborn as a demon. As evidence of this fact, she was taking great delight in the hellish spectacle created by her Original Sin Conjuring.

Suddenly, an impact rocked Manon's body.

"Hmm?"

Manon blinked in surprise. After a moment, she realized there was a blade stabbing through her chest.

She looked around, but there was no one to be seen.

Despite being stabbed in the ribcage, Manon's body didn't spill a single drop of red blood. Instead, a black liquid stained the breast of her kimono.

"Aha! So you finally came? How very kind."

Manon pressed her palms together delightedly in spite of the blade through the place where her heart should be.

She had a hunch as to the identity of the invisible assassin. Pulling the dagger out of her chest, she held it out politely toward someone she couldn't see.

There was a ripple in the empty air.

Guiding Camouflage.

It was an adaptive camouflage technique using the phosphorescent light of Guiding Enhancement. As the disguise fell away to reveal a dark-red-haired

priestess, Manon bowed her head reverently.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Master Flare. Darkest of all the darkness of the Faust. The most successful taboo hunter in history. You’ve slipped past even the Elders who try to control this world and tried to carry your blade into the abyss. I am but a humble demon who attends on Pandæmonium by some strange coincidence; my name is Manon Libelle.”

“It’s been a while, kid.”

It’s been a while.

Those words sent an uncharacteristic thrill of joy through Manon’s chest. Manon and Flare had indeed met once, a long time ago. Manon’s mother was a lost one, considered a taboo. It was none other than Master Flare who had killed Manon’s mother right in front of her eyes.

To Manon, it was an event that changed her entire outlook on life, but she had assumed that Flare wouldn’t remember it at all.

“You’ve certainly put on quite a show here.”

“Oh yes. It would have been simply impossible for me to track you down. I used the Fourth to investigate, but even then, the most information I could get was that you might be in this general area. Thus, I created a stage you would have no choice but to stand upon.”

Manon had managed to figure out through her research that Flare was likely in this area, but she couldn’t get a more detailed location.

And so she caused this massive tragedy.

If a taboo destroyed an entire city, surely an Executioner in the area would be unable to ignore it. With that in mind, she’d decided to incite a zombie apocalypse. With guidance from Pandæmonium, she’d created a corrupt conjuring that spread from the dead to the living.

“Where is Pandæmonium?”

It was an abrupt question, but Manon simply put a finger to her lips, her demeanor unaffected. She smiled mischievously, like any girl her age trying to tease an adult.

“That’s a secret.”

“I see. Fine, then. If I slice that stomach of yours open, you’ll spill your guts, right?”

“Actually, I have a question for you as well. It’s about the method by which a lost one can return to the other world—in other words, the ceremony that can send someone in this world back to Japan.”

“There’s no such thing.”

“Pardon? But of course there is.”

Manon paid no mind to the priestess’s denial. She simply continued with the assumption that it did exist.

After all, she already knew about it.

“Its existence is the whole reason that ancient civilization fell a thousand years ago.”

The Four Major Human Errors and the *Ivory* hero.

These five people had destroyed a civilization at the height of humanity out of a rebellion against this world because they wanted to go back to their own.

There was a brief silence.

“...Listen, Manon Libelle.”

The Master sighed.

It was a long, heavy sigh. The words that followed were no attempt to feign ignorance, but based on certain knowledge.

“There’s no such thing because we would never let that happen.”

“Aha!” Manon giggled.

So it really did exist. A path to the other world. For Manon, it was a means of going to her mother’s homeland.

“Hee-hee-hee...ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, Master Flare. I’ve decided. Just now, I made up my mind!”

Manon smiled so charmingly that anyone might fall for her. She knew exactly

what kind of chaos she had to cause and stated it in a clear, loud voice.

“I am going to the other world—to Japan. And I shall plunge this world into chaos as my sacrifice if that is what it takes to get there.”

Flare didn’t answer. She charged her dagger with Guiding Force and activated a crest conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Branch]

Branches of Guiding Force spread from Flare’s dagger. They reached not just for the false body Manon wore for show, but toward her real self, her shadow.

“Oh dear...”

The Guiding Force that formed from Flare’s dagger by way of the crest conjuring spread out like real branches and pierced through Manon from the inside.

Any ordinary person would no doubt die immediately.

However, the attack didn’t kill Manon. She moved her shadow and tore the branches apart. As soon as the connection was broken, the branches made of Guiding Force inside Manon vanished as well.

The branches weren’t particularly strong, but it was a crest conjuring with any number of practical uses.

“Are you sure about this?” Manon ventured, changing the subject. “There will only be more casualties if you waste your time on me.”

This calamity would continue whether Manon was there or not. Even now, corpses were continuing to chase down the living.

“Seems you’ve got the wrong idea.”

Her response wasn’t even cold, just indifferent. Flare undoubtedly had the strength to save the people being assaulted by this tragedy, yet she made no effort to stop the casualties unfolding around her.

“An Executioner’s main priority is executing taboos; protecting citizens is not part of our mission. No matter how many people die, my job is done as long as I kill the taboo that killed them. In this case, that means all I have to do is kill

you.”

The priestess clearly didn’t care in the least how many people died in the city below.

She doesn’t seem likely to give me an opening, then, Manon thought. Even if she sent the nearby corpses after the priestess, the branches made of Guiding Force from Flare’s dagger would likely fend them off with ease. There was no point trying to attack with numbers when her opponent had a crest conjuring that could cover her in all directions.

Well, in that case... Manon activated the summoning she’d prepared in advance.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Original Sin, Pride of Fiends: Body, Soul, Spirit—Summon [Hungry Hell Ghost]

Immediately, the dead bodies on the street began to melt. She had offered the corpses wandering around the city as a sacrifice to invoke a summon conjuring. As the bodies rotted and dripped to the ground, the resulting liquid gathered between Manon and Flare, taking on a horrific new form.

“They’re not exactly high-quality sacrifices, but there certainly is strength in numbers.”

Compared to a living person, the body, soul, and spirit of a corpse was far inferior. But with high enough numbers, one could still summon a powerful demon.

This zombie apocalypse was nothing more than a ritual to create more sacrifices. It was another method Manon had learned from Pandæmonium.

A giant mass of flesh formed. It took on the giant shape of a flabby, swollen baby, bigger than any building in the area. Just a single flail of its arm was enough to destroy part of the city. If it lost its temper and started screaming and crying, the sound could corrupt the spirit of an ordinary person. How could anyone fight against such a demon? Any normal human would surely give up and despair.

How would a living legend among Executioners contend with this giant enemy?

As Manon watched her eagerly, Flare stood looking colder than ever.

“How nice of you to gather all the pesky little flies in one place for me.”

With that, she threw her dagger.

Manon furrowed her brow.

The demon she’d just summoned wasn’t the type of enemy that could be defeated with a stab. As she wondered what Flare was thinking, her question was answered by the conjuring that activated as the dagger flew through the air.

Guiding Force: Auto-Connect (Conditions Met)—Guiding Branches, Crest—

An automatic invocation. The sphere of branches that had grown from the dagger’s hilt formed a three-dimensional crest.

Invoke [Mistle Sword]

The Guiding Branches rapidly expanded.

They absorbed the Guiding Force of their target and kept growing, the branches shining brightly as they stretched outward. The giant baby Manon had summoned began to shrivel, the twigs tangling around its body as they absorbed all of its strength.

The demon’s body scattered into dust. But the mistletoe-shaped mass of branches made of Guiding Force didn’t stop growing there—they pierced through the summoner, Manon.

“I’ll give you thirty seconds. Get Pandæmonium here.”

It was a straightforward demand.

I see. Manon was wondering why the priestess didn’t finish her off, but now it was clear. Manon had a summoning contract with Pandæmonium. Flare wanted to hurt her and make her summon the Human Error.

Manon cast her gaze aside carefully and brought up the question she’d been saving for Flare.

“As long as we’re here, would you mind if I asked you about something?”

“I’m starting the countdown. You have thirty seconds.”

Flare's strength didn't waver for a moment. She began counting.

"You see, I discovered some fascinating materials in Grisarika Kingdom."

"Twenty-five seconds."

"It was the experiment log of a person who became archbishop. Apparently, one of the taboos she committed turned an entire village pure white. Isn't that just awful?"

"Thirteen seconds."



“Now, it just so happens that I have a friend who came from that very village... I felt I must memorialize their sacrifice, so I investigated the family registry. And would you believe it? There wasn’t a single record of a girl named Menou coming from that village!”

“Five seconds.”

“Which is why I’m wondering...”

“Three seconds.”

“...Where exactly did our dear Menou come from?”

The Guiding Branches spread.

They burst out of Manon’s body, overriding even her shadow. It was an attack with merciless force and no way to escape.

“Honestly. That almost got really bad!”

“Thank you for saving me. That was so exciting. I thought I was going to be blown to bits.”

An innocent voice rang out from beyond the reach of the branches.

Pandæmonium was standing outside the attack range of the Guiding Branches, and somehow, she was holding a completely unharmed Manon in her arms.

“There you are.”

While the Master shifted as though preparing for the real battle, Manon patted Pandæmonium’s head softly.

“Now then, let’s run away, shall we? That woman over there is ‘it.’”

“Mm, a game of tag! How exciting.”

As Manon promptly chose to flee in spite of the addition of Pandæmonium’s aid, Flare’s scowl deepened slightly for the first time, and she touched the Guiding Branches.

Guiding Force: Connect (via Guiding Branches)—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Thunderclap]

The Guiding Force in the branches that had expanded to the size of the giant demon they'd destroyed converted all at once into electricity. An overpowering amount of heat rolled toward Manon, and a massive bolt of lightning shot up from the ground toward the sky.

"...Looks like they got away."

The Master looked around. Manon was gone. She'd escaped.

That was fine. If she couldn't crush Pandæmonium's little finger, it was for the best that she let Manon live, too. It would be easier to track down Pandæmonium if she was working with Manon toward a goal than if she was rampaging indiscriminately on her own.

Flare had no more business here. As she began walking, a voice spoke to her.

"Knowing the future isn't always a blessing. Sometimes, that knowledge comes with even more duties to perform."

It came from the scripture the priestess was holding.

"More importantly, Master: I do not believe we can avoid contact from Elder—Magician—much longer."

"Listen up. You're a piece of junk, got it? It makes perfect sense that you would fail to receive a communication signal over and over."

"Oh, very well. Excellent as I am, I suppose I can continue to carry out your absurd demands."

"Good. That idiot's about to betray her anyway. I don't care how much *Time* changes, but..."

She threw her head back and laughed, her mouth open wide.

"...We've got to prevent the second coming of *Ivory*, no matter what happens."

After about half a day of travel through the desert, Menou made it back to the inn where Akari was supposed to be waiting.

All she wanted to do now was rest. Her body was covered in small cuts and bruises. Most of all, she was completely exhausted, a deep-seated fatigue that

would be hard to recover from.

However, she wasn't exactly alone.

Technically speaking, yes, Menou was on her own. She had come back by herself.

"...I wanna die."

Her scripture spoke.

It was an incredibly gloomy voice. Menou gingerly opened her scripture, and Guiding Light rose up from the pages.

The light formed a three-dimensional image: a palm-sized projection of Sahara. She was sitting with her knees hugged to her chest and glaring up reproachfully at Menou.

Of course, Menou wasn't just playing around with the projection technology of the scripture on her own.

Menou covered her face with her palm.

"How did it turn out like this...?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

Shockingly enough, Sahara's soul and spirit were dwelling in Menou's scripture. When and how had this happened in the midst of that battle? Was it when Menou was almost possessed, and she poured everything that had entered her body into the scripture instead? Or had Sahara's soul and spirit turned into something incredibly unique when she was possessed by the *Vessel*?

"I don't want to live in disgrace. Burn me right now."

"Can you really describe yourself as 'living' in this state?"

"The definition of 'life' is the combination of a body, a spirit, and a soul. I hate to admit it, but I'm guessing I've become a Guiding Force life-form with this scripture as my body."

It was occasionally possible for a human to become a Guiding Force life-form.

This happened when the human body was discarded and the spirit and soul

transferred elsewhere by way of Guiding Force technology.

Incidentally, doing this artificially was considered taboo. Even if it happened by chance, Menou could get into serious trouble for allowing Sahara to exist in her scripture.

Menou sank into silence. She knew she had to burn the scripture. And yet, it would be a tactical disadvantage to lose her scripture here.

"...I'll wait until I can exchange my scripture in the next town."

In all likelihood, Menou never would have made that decision back when she first met Akari.

"You're the worst. This sucks. I want to die. Why do I have to be stuck hanging out with you of all people?"

"I don't feel great about killing you a second time."

"...Why does the scripture even have such an elaborate conjuring construction that it can store a person's soul?"

Menou bit her lip.

Sahara had a point. If the scripture could transfer a human's spirit, that meant it already contained conjuring constructions that could produce a humanlike Guiding Force life-form.

"We might've just stumbled on a weird secret. Doesn't this mean you're on the verge of sticking your nose where it doesn't belong? Why don't you burn me before anyone else finds out?"

"Yes, well, I'll think about it. For now, just make sure you don't say a word in front of Akari. That would be such a headache, I don't even want to think about it."

"I'm on Team Akari, not Team Momo, so I want to support her however I can."

"Also, I can't seem to make contact with Momo. In fact, I'm having trouble constructing scripture conjurings in general at the moment."

"I'm more than happy to prevent you from contacting that violent little shit...!"

"I see you still have strong feelings about that..."

This had to be some kind of bug.

If it was arbitrarily preventing her from using conjurings, this was basically a virus. Cursing at Sahara, who was still inconsiderate even now that she was a Guiding Force life-form, Menou entered their room at the inn.

There was no one inside.

“Akari...?”

Menou looked around for signs of life. Then her eyes fell on Momo’s scripture, left abandoned on the desk. Akari’s headband lay on top of it, holding down a single piece of paper in between.

I’m taking Akari Tokitou away.

That was all that was written there, in Momo’s own handwriting.

“*Oh boy.*” If the voice coming from the scripture still had a body, she would definitely have been shaking her head and shrugging. “*This is why I told you to be careful about Momo.*”

“But...why...?”

Momo was Menou’s assistant and dear friend.

Unexpectedly betrayed by the one girl she trusted most in the world, Menou could only stand in dumbfounded silence.





AFTERWORD

Author: “What do you want for Christmas?”

Editor: “Maybe the finished manuscript for *Executioner*, Vol. 3.”

In the dead of winter, this cold conversation took place at the end of the first year of the Reiwa era.

Christmas flew by faster than you could shake a jingle bell, but Santa Claus didn't leave a manuscript under my tree, so the book wasn't done in time for Christmas. Damn you, Santa...! Why wouldn't you bring good little Mato a manuscript as a present...? Oh, it's because I was naughty by not meeting my deadline...? But listen, Santa! I wouldn't be asking you for a manuscript if I met my deadline! So technically, couldn't you say I did the right thing by not meeting my deadline so that I could ask for it in my letter to Santa Claus?! This is a question of the chicken or the egg... And as I was struggling with this philosophical quandary, I couldn't even get my manuscript in to my editor Null as a New Year's gift. Whoopsie.

Oh well. At least I didn't end up having to send it in February as a Valentine's Day gift. February 14 is practically the release date.

Let's move on to the thank-yous.

To nilitsu, the illustrator:

I am sincerely sorry that you were forced to work on an unbelievably tight schedule because of me. I can't thank you enough for turning in such beautiful, high-quality illustrations in spite of all that.

To my editor, Null:

You have no idea how apologetic I feel that you had to deal with a nightmarish level of progress management because of me. Really.

I hope to continue writing a world with Menou at the center even as it threatens to leave her behind, along with the changing relationships between the characters.

If we can meet again in Volume 4, nothing would bring me more joy.

Until then.

Red is the
color of
despair.

The
Executioner 4
and Her Way of Life

COMING SOON

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